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BEAUTY
FOR ASHES.



BEAUTY FOR ASHES.

BY

ALEXANDER DICKSON,

AUTHOR OF "ALL ABOUT JESUS."

"A Crown for Ashes."—*Isa. lxi. 3. The Vulgate.*

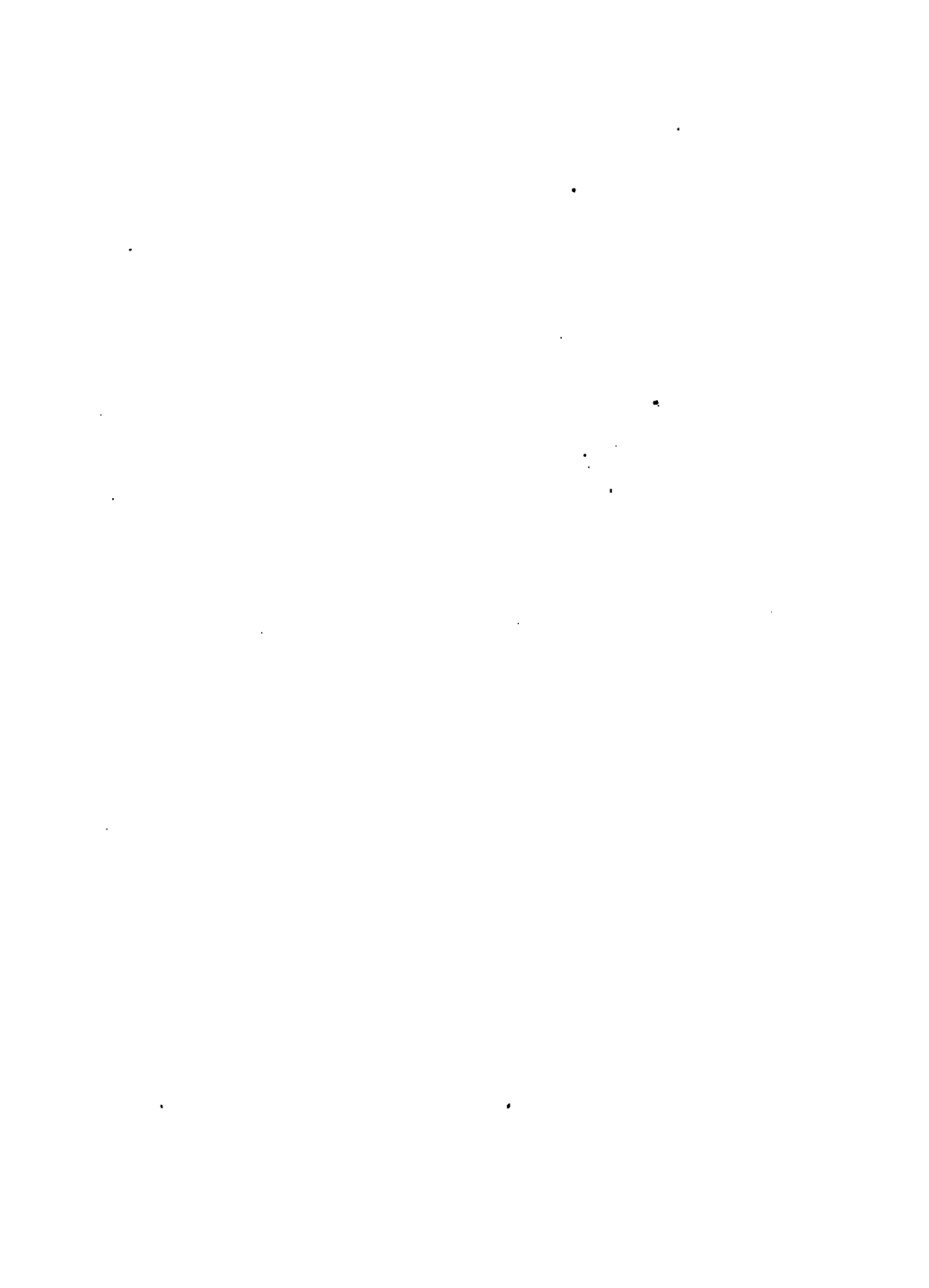


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I BELIEVE IN
THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS,
AND DEDICATE THIS BOOK
TO
My Friends in Heaven.
"THESE ARE THEY
WHICH CAME OUT OF GREAT TRIBULATION,
AND HAVE WASHED THEIR ROBES,
AND MADE THEM WHITE
IN
The Blood of the Lamb."¹

¹ Rev. vii. 14.

“THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD GOD
IS UPON ME;
BECAUSE THE LORD HATH ANOINTED ME TO PREACH
GOOD TIDINGS UNTO THE MEEK;
HE HATH SENT ME
TO BIND UP THE BROKEN-HEARTED,
TO PROCLAIM LIBERTY TO THE CAPTIVES,
AND
THE OPENING OF THE PRISON TO THEM THAT ARE BOUND;
TO PROCLAIM THE ACCEPTABLE YEAR OF THE LORD,
AND THE DAY OF VENGEANCE OF OUR GOD;
TO COMFORT ALL THAT MOURN;
TO APPOINT UNTO THEM THAT MOURN IN ZION,
TO GIVE UNTO THEM BEAUTY FOR ASHES,
THE OIL OF JOY FOR MOURNING,
THE GARMENT OF PRAISE FOR THE SPIRIT OF HEAVINESS;
THAT THEY MIGHT BE CALLED
TREES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS,
THE PLANTING OF THE LORD, THAT HE MIGHT BE
GLORIFIED.”

Isa. lxi. 1-3.

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THE TRAVELLING STRANGER.

BEAUTY FOR ASHES.

CHAPTER I.

"I am a stranger with Thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were."—PSALM xxxix. 12.

COULD we hear the descendant of some Siberian exile, after gazing long and sadly over the icy wastes that lay between him and the land he has been taught to love, speak these words to his weeping brother near him; or could we hear them moaned out by some poor slave to his fellow-slave, as the weary days went slowly by, they would not surprise us so much: because the language then would be in exact correspondence with the outward condition of the speakers.

But he who gave them utterance originally was neither an exile nor a slave; but, strange as it may seem, was one to whom princes bowed in reverence, and a mighty nation was obedient. The marks and emblems of royalty were round about him. A stately palace, to build and beautify which Lebanon had been shorn of its choicest cedars and Ophir had bled its purest gold, reared its fretted roof above his crowned head; a shining sceptre was in his hand, and owning him for king, with loving loyalty, Jerusalem and all the pleasant land of Palestine, now rich

to overflowing with material wealth, delighted to do him honor. And yet, compassed about with all these signs of permanence, crowned King David says, "I am a stranger."

Looking out from the latticed window of his imperial mansion, he could see the strong tower which he himself had builded for an armory; the burnished housetops that broke, like waves, beside it; and the massive walls that in their rough, strong setting closed round "The joy of the whole earth"¹ like a jewel. And still further on beyond, he could catch the glimmer of that goodly land, which was "the glory of all lands,"² now groaning beneath its blessed burden of "milk and honey"; and glowing with more golden tints than gladdened the eye of Moses, when his dying gaze was fixed upon it from "the top of Pisgah."³

Seeing all this, David might have felt and said, "This goodly land is mine, this is my continuing city, this is my abiding home: here will I dwell and delight myself all the days of my life." But with a truer feeling, and a more faithful utterance, he turns his eyes away from these vanities, and lifts up his voice to his companion God, saying, "I am a stranger with Thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were." His heart was not at home amid the glories that surrounded him; but, weary with the loneliness of royalty, it panted for that highest and happiest home where it might be at rest indeed, and in truth, and forever. Earth was its sojourning place; heaven

¹ Lam. ii. 15.

² Ezek. xx. 6.

³ Deut. xxxiv. 1.

the abiding city towards which all its aspiration and its effort tended.

Such strangers, in every sense of the word, were Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the pilgrim fathers spoken of in the text who "sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country."¹ The altar and the pillar, the staff and the tent, were indeed their true, and often their only, possessions; "with my staff I passed over this Jordan;"² and by their daily lives and visible movements they proved the characters to which they were called: "For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country."³

Such strangers are Christians now, for Christian experience is mainly the same everywhere and in all ages. When by the grace of God we are passing over from the "old man" into the "new man," the heart beats responsively at every step to the language of the text. No outward sign of moving tent, or wayworn feet, or supporting staff, may mark its progress; but in its inner life, and along the pilgrimage of personal experience, these things are as truly represented as in the early nomadic days. And although about the Christian now, as about the life of David, there may seem to gather attachments, and earth to wear a look of permanence, still, in his heart of hearts, he feels as David felt, that he is a stranger here and a sojourner.

In the character thus portrayed the true Christian finds his counterpart, and lifted into a standard,

¹ Heb. xi. 9.

² Gen. xxxii. 10.

³ Heb. xi. 14.

the confession in the text becomes the test of his sincerity.

In a broad and comprehensive sense, it is true of all the inhabitants of the world, that they are strangers and sojourners on its surface. The present generation knows not the generation that preceded it, nor can it tell the features of the generation that is to come after it. From his birth to his burial man lives in a strange land. He wanders to and fro, gazing curiously up at the dome of the universe, gilded with the light of suns, or sprinkled with the dust of stars. He looks out on eternity as from the shore of some wide sea, watching the great tide of life as it ebbs and flows at his feet; but knowing nothing of the mystery or the meaning of its motion. He picks up some pebble truth, or finds the pearly shell of some secondary cause, admires, wonders, and listens to its music, but comprehends it not. He does not even know himself, the language of his own being he can not understand. His very thoughts, purposes, and impulses are marvels to his mind; and so, living, wondering, wandering, toiling, fretting, a stranger to the world in which he lives, a stranger to himself, each lonely individual fills out his little sojourn here, and straight is seen no more.

But while in reality the character of the stranger may justly attach to all, it is peculiarly the Christian's own. He indeed lives in the world, but is not of it. By his first birth he is a citizen of earth, but by his second birth from above, he becomes a native of the "better country," and henceforth heaven is his

home. Beyond time and space, and above the little hum of things of sense, his adoring mind catches glimmerings of its distant glory, and murmurings of the blessed music of its courts. "I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps: and they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth."¹

Who wonders, then, in view of heaven's everlasting blessedness, and the immortal thoughts and delightful occupations that will engross him there, the Christian's heart should grow weary with his residence on earth, and indifferent to the petty schemes, and cheap concerns, that bubble up and burst around him here? Who wonders that the stranger feeling, as of one alone in a foreign land, should control and crush his spirit; "for all his days are sorrows,"² and his sojourn here the cruel absence from a happy home?

The home feeling of the heart! who does not know something of its gentleness and its power? How lovingly it garners up and invests with a kind of sacredness scenes and associations which but for it would have no permanence in the mind! How it links men to localities, binds them in families, and becomes the very life of the nation! What spot on earth has such radiant sunshine resting on it as that which gilds and

¹ Rev. xiv. 2, 3.

² Eccl. ii. 23.

glorifies the dear acres round our early childhood's home? In memory's never fading light the well, the brook, the trees, the grass, the flowers seem purer, sweeter, nobler, greener, brighter there than we have found them elsewhere, and we who played about them seem to ourselves less sinful then than now.

Home, how sweet it sounds! What a bundle of myrrh it is! and behold, and count up if you can, how many loves are bound up in it! There is a mother's love, and a father's love, and a sister's love, and a brother's love, and the love of kindred scarcely less dear than a mother's own. Is it any wonder that the heart should nestle in a place so full of love as this, or that its recollection is always so fresh? After years of absence, from the uttermost parts of the earth, it reaches back with an earnest longing that can not be satisfied, and under the influence of a spell that can not be broken.

A simple sound, the sight of some familiar article, by reason of their home associations have unmanned the stoutest hearts. Their native airs, when played before them in foreign countries, have rendered whole regiments of fierce, stern soldiers unfit for duty. Even death itself has often followed from excessive longing to return to one's native land. To be at home, is the soldier's wish from the tented field; and on the eve of battle, a few moments are snatched from the busy hours to write letters to the loved ones at home. To be at home, is the earnest desire of the suffering invalid, hurrying from some more friendly clime to which he had vainly gone in quest of health; and

nerving every flagging energy, he dies contented, if only he may catch the sight, or lay himself beneath the old roof-tree at last.

Now, we need scarcely say that whatever shows the power and the depth of feeling binding men to their earthly home illustrates the real Christian's deeper love and yearning for his heavenly home. We have always regarded home as the best earthly image of heaven. It is that part of paradise which was never lost, and to this day it is the remnant and the emblem of Eden's bliss. Home and heaven are not so far separated as we sometimes think. Nay, they are not separated at all, for they are both in the same great building. Home is the lower story, and is located down here on the ground floor: heaven is above stairs, in the second and "third"¹ stories; and as one after another the family is called to come up higher, that which seemed to be such a strange place begins to wear a familiar aspect; and when at last not one is left below, the home is transferred to heaven, and heaven is home. And while we are absent from it, it can not be expected that we should be perfectly happy. Away from home! away from heaven! away from our best Father! away from our best Brother! away from our best Comforter! away from our dearest kindred, who have gone to dwell above in light and love and peace and "joy unspeakable and full of glory,"² is it any wonder if we are homesick sometimes; and that our experience is that of a stranger in a strange land?

¹ II Cor. xii. 2.

² I Pet. i. 8.

But the stranger is not the exact image of the Christian. He is something more than a stranger, and so another word is added, by the Psalmist, to make the portrait more complete,—“I am a stranger and a sojourner.” This last word though near of kin to the first is not quite the same. There is a shade of difference in its meaning, which will give a little more of coloring to the picture, and help to make it a more lifelike likeness of the Man of God. A stranger is one who belongs to another country. A sojourner is a temporary resident. The one may have a permanent abode in a strange land; but the moving tent must needs be the habitation of the other, who is always and everywhere a wayfaring man.

Such being the signification of these words, both were needed in order to describe the Christian, who is a stranger and a sojourner. Or, if we may put the two words in one, we would say, he is a pilgrim. A man with the shoes on his feet, the staff in his hand, and the bundle on his back; a travelling stranger, a man of another country going home, a pilgrim on the world's highway. His back is turned on the earth, and his face is set towards heaven. Here he is a stranger. Up in heaven he will be no more a foreigner but a fellow-citizen. Here he has the heart of a stranger. Up in heaven he will have the heart of a child at home. Here he is a sojourner and dwells awhile in a shelter tent. Up in heaven he will be a wayfaring man no more, but abide always in the house of many mansions. Weary-footed, weary-hearted, and often weeping, is it any wonder if he

longs for the time to come, when he shall put off his pilgrim shoes, at the gate of heaven, and enter his Father's house,—his sweetest, best, and most blessed home.

Perhaps some of you may be able to sympathize with him in his earnest desire to reach the heavenly country. You had been away from home for a long season, and you can not forget how anxious you were to return, especially after the journey was commenced. The swiftest conveyance was too slow for you, when you were coming home to hear your father's welcome, your mother's soft, sweet, loving voice, and your sister's gentle greeting. To your heart the wings of love were given, and it went on ahead, and, in the special express train, you were slowly coming after. But that sweet home is not half so sweet as heaven. It may be happy now, but it must be unhappy in a little while. Not many days hence the cheerful circle will be in tears around an empty cradle, or in an empty chamber.

Come with me to a father's house, it may be your father's house, we will tarry but a moment. It is the morning of Thanksgiving Day. The children and the children's children are all come home to keep the feast. All did I say? Let me turn to the family record in the old family Bible, and call their names and see. Joseph? "Joseph is not." Simeon? "Simeon is not."¹ And, sorer still, there is a prophetic flush on his cheek that threatens to take dear little Benjamin away.

¹ Gen. xlii. 36.

Such is the earthly home. To-day the golden chain is unbroken, and every chair is occupied. All the "olive plants"¹ are growing round about the table, beautiful and goodly to look to. To-morrow one is missing here, and another is missing there. But the heavenly home is always happy. Not one is missing there. There is no time there "to pluck up that which is planted."² There is no cemetery near the New Jerusalem, nor are there any graves anywhere in the "better country." And the house of many mansions will never be a house of mourning. "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."³ "They shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them: for He that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall He guide them."⁴

But the best, the brightest, and the most beautiful gem yet remains to be taken from the casket of the text. The previous thoughts were pearls, and very precious, but this last is the most precious of all, "I am a stranger with Thee."

With whom? with my pilgrim companions by the way? No. With those who are at home in my house? Not so: "I am a stranger with Thee," my best Father in heaven, my best Friend upon earth. A stranger with God. What a transporting thought! What a great and glorious truth! King David was

¹ Ps. cxxviii. 3.

² Eccl. iii. 2.

³ Rev. xxi. 4.

⁴ Isa. xlix. 10.

on his bended knees, his face was turned up toward heaven, when this bundle of myrrh fell from his anointed lips: "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with Thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were."

This part of the text presents on its surface this splendid, soul-filling, and sublime truth:

"Awake, asleep, at home, abroad,
I am surrounded still with God."

Blessed be His name, He is near enough to hear my lowest whisper; and plenteous enough to supply all my wants. His wisdom is mine to direct me in the way that I should go, and His power is mine to protect me in the time of danger; "For the Lord God is a sun and shield: the Lord will give grace and glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly."¹ This is the surface thought of these words of David's prayer: "I am a stranger with Thee." It floats and shines like amber on the ocean, and when we are strangers in a strange land, it is confessedly comforting to think, to feel, and to know that we are guided and guarded by that God who hath promised to "Keep the feet of His saints,"² and make their shoes out of "iron and brass,"³ and who is always saying unto them, "There shall not a hair of your head perish."⁴

But, deeper down in the text, there is a dearer

¹ Ps. lxxxiv. 11.

² I Sam. ii. 9.

³ Deut. xxxiii. 25.

⁴ Luke xxi. 18.

thought than this. "I am a stranger with Thee:" that is, if I may express it so, Thou, my God, art my travelling companion, "alone, and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me;"¹ the Father of my Lord Jesus, and my Father. He shares my pilgrimage, and helps me over every hill of difficulty. "Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her Beloved?"²

You remember when the two burdened and broken-hearted disciples were returning to the village of Emmaus, "Jesus Himself drew near, and went with them."³ And as they walked their sorrow was turned into joy. The engaging and entertaining Stranger charmed away their sadness, and changed their pain into pleasure. His timely and tender conversation, concerning Himself, caused their hearts to burn within them, and before they were aware they were at their journey's end. And we need not tell you that an agreeable travelling companion will smooth the roughest road, and make it seem much shorter than it really is.

One of the brightest pages in the Old Testament is that which records the affectionate friendship of David and his Jonathan. They loved each other, as they loved their own souls, and seemed to have but one heart and one mind. They lived for each other, and labored for each other with a self-sacrificing spirit, as remarkable as it is rare; and it was the chief end of each, to promote the other's happiness. And when David learned that his leal-hearted friend

¹ John xvi. 32. ² Cant. viii. 5. ³ Luke xxiv. 15.

was slain in battle, in that lamentation, every letter of which seems a tear, he said, "I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women."¹ Without controversy they twain were the truest yoke-fellows that ever shared each other's joys and sorrows; and if David had been speaking to Jonathan in the text, there would have been much sweet comfort to the Psalmist in the thought that he had the companionship of such a tried and never failing-friend. But Jehovah was a better friend than Jonathan, and He, His own self, was David's fellow-traveller; a stranger, with the man after His own heart, and a sojourner.

Do you not remember well the manner in which the children of Israel journeyed through the wilderness with their God? The tabernacle and the tent travelled both of them together; and wherever the one was pitched, there the other was pitched also; the tent always in the shadow of the tabernacle. And have you not often read their morning and evening prayer while on their march? How as the ark set forward Moses said, "Rise up, Lord, and let thine enemies be scattered: and let them that hate Thee flee before Thee:"² just as if Jehovah had been tarrying with them where they tarried; and He had. And how again when the ark rested the prayer went up, "Return, O Lord, unto the many thousands of Israel:"³ just as if Jehovah had been travelling in their company. And so He had; with His pilgrim

¹ II Sam. i. 26.² Num. x. 35.³ Num. x. 36.

shoes on His mighty feet, and His pilgrim staff in His mighty hand; a wayfaring God with His wayfaring people and their companion in tribulation, according to the promise, "My presence shall go with thee and I will give thee rest."¹

What then if we are in the wilderness! Our wilderness God is with us here to choose all our changes? And what if we are so thoroughly weary, since we nightly pitch the moving tent beside the moving tabernacle, and both a day's march nearer home. Our pilgrim God, glory be to His blessed name, will have no temple to dwell in while His pilgrim people have nothing better than a tent. It was not till after David had a "house of cedars"² that David's Lord ceased to dwell "under curtains." "I have not dwelt in any house since the time that I brought up the children of Israel out of Egypt, even to this day, but have walked in a tent and in a tabernacle."³

It is a pleasant Hebrew fancy that gives to every child of God a guardian angel to attend him in all his ways. It is a precious Scripture truth that the angels are "all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation."⁴ As we pitch our tents day after day, it is pleasant to think the angels encamp round about us; but if we are His "peculiar people,"⁵ God Himself is our Guardian Angel and better to hold us up, and help us on our way, than all the heavenly hosts.

¹ Exod. xxxiii. 14.

² I Chron. xvii. 1.

³ II Sam. vii. 6.

⁴ Heb. i. 14.

⁵ I Peter ii. 9.

Dearly beloved, such is the real meaning of the text, as we understand it. Behold, what a sweetening branch it brings for all the bitter waters by the way! "Ye know the heart of a stranger,"¹ how sad, how silent it sometimes is! "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"² But our hearts are sad and our harps are silent only, when we forget our fellow Traveller, the One who says, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world."³

It is very pleasant to think that we are strangers together. Our companionship with one another helps to relieve that feeling of loneliness that often comes over us, like a cloud, and we can comfort and cheer one another along our weary earth way. But this better, this blessed, this Bible thought, that we are strangers with God, causes our brimming cup to overflow. Oh how much better it is, to be a stranger here with God, and have a home in heaven, than to be a citizen of this poorer country without God, and be an emigrant in eternity. Dear brethren, I give you joy, and I ask you to rejoice with me, because though we be strangers in a strange land, we are going home and Jehovah-Jireh, Jehovah-Jesus, is going with us, and He will never leave us nor forsake us; "For this God is our God forever and ever: He will be our guide even unto death."⁴

I may not close without a word of warning to myself, and my companions "in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ."⁵ Dearly

¹ Exod. xxiii. 9.

² Ps. cxxxvii. 4.

³ Mat. xxviii. 20.

⁴ Ps. xlviii. 14.

⁵ Rev. i. 9.

beloved, we are wayfaring men, and as such it is better for us not to be burdened with too much baggage. A staff, a pair of shoes, and one coat are all that we really need. Come then, and "let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset;"¹ and, on our journey home, let us take with us only such other things as we can conveniently carry. "A good conscience"² is never cumbersome; and "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance,"³ are more in number, and better every way, than the "six wings"⁴ of the seraphim. And always and everywhere, let us wait on the Lord: "He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might He increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."⁵

Some strangers, after a short season of homesickness, are so bewitched with the beauty of the charming country through which they are passing, that they cast away the stakes and curtains of their tents, and gather stones and cut down trees, and build themselves magnificent mansions, and in a little while they lose all love for the heavenly home, toward which their faces once were set. Strange to say, in this "snare of the fowler,"⁶ King Solomon

¹ Heb. xii. 1.² Heb. xiii. 18.³ Gal. v. 22, 23.⁴ Isa. vi. 2.⁵ Isa. xl. 28-31.⁶ Ps. xci. 3.

was taken. On the grandest scale, he tried to make for himself a happy home in this world, and in the saddest book of the Bible he has left on record the result of his experiment, showing clearly that the wisest man was the greatest fool. "I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees: I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold, and peculiar treasure of kings and provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy: for my heart rejoiced in all my labor: and this was my portion of all my labor. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun."¹

My beloved brethren, if any of you are tempted to do likewise, let me warn you to have a care and count the cost. "Set your affection on things above, not

¹ Eccl. ii. 4-11.

on things on the earth.”¹ Forget not that you are travelling strangers, and fix not your habitation here below, lest you learn at last, too late, and to your eternal loss, that he builds too low who builds beneath the skies.

“Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all them that love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen.”²

¹ Col. iii. 2.

² Eph. vi. 22-24.

MARAH AND ELIM.



CHAPTER II.

"And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? And he cried unto the Lord; and the Lord showed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: there he made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there he proved them, and said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in His sight, and wilt give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that healeth thee. And they came to Elim, where were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm trees: and they encamped there by the waters."—EXODUS xv. 23-27.

IN the beginning of the way of the wilderness there are two very interesting places called Marah and Elim. They are interesting in themselves, as they are the first two stations at which the Israelites stopped in their journey from Egypt to Canaan. They are interesting in their associations; the burning sands, the bitter waters, and the sweetening tree of the one—the green pastures, the shadowing palms, and the salutary wells of the other, were so graven on the hearts and minds of the covenant people, that they could never be forgotten.

But to us they are interesting, especially, because they are so emblematic of our life. Our sorrows and

our joys; our pains and our pleasures; our distressing retreats and our delightful resting-places, are all faithfully foreshadowed by these two memorable places, in the margin of the wilderness, Marah and Elim.

As the skilful artist, in making a good portrait, finds it essentially necessary to use the dark and bright colors alternately, so the Divine Artist dips His pencil, by turns, in Marah and Elim. In Marah first, and the background is laid in darkness black as midnight, and then in Elim, and the blackness is relieved with the colors of the rainbow. Marah and Elim, here and there; first the one, and then the other; the bitter, and then the sweet; the sorrow, and then the joy; the house of mourning, and then the house of feasting; and these, now and then, all our journey through. "The evening and the morning were the first day: and the evening and the morning were the sixth day."¹

We propose to direct your attention to these two places, Marah and Elim, to which we are coming in such quick succession, and where, even now, some of our moving tents may be pitched, believing that we shall see ourselves in the waters of both, and praying that their timely lessons may be learned more perfectly. If by any means we could consider them in one sermon, we would be glad to do so, because they are so intimately connected. But furnishing, as they do, such an abundance of material for instruction, we shall be obliged to put them asunder

¹ Gen. i. 5, 31.

for the short space of time between our services; and taking the first by itself alone, Marah shall be our theme this morning.

At Marah the Israelites were sorely disappointed. Almost immediately after their thanksgiving service, on the shore of the Red Sea, which they had crossed in safety, they continued their mysterious march. Their divinely directed course lay through a destitute region of country which was sandy and stony, by turns, and hard to travel; and sorer still, it was "a land of drought and of the shadow of death;"¹ and for the space of three days they found no water. We do not suppose that they were entirely destitute of water for so long a time; because in such a case many of them must have perished. The record simply says that, "they went three days in the wilderness and found no water."² They crossed no running stream, they discovered no gushing spring.

Before starting from the sea-shore they had doubtless filled their leathern bottles with water enough to serve them for awhile; but at last their scanty supply is quite exhausted, and they begin to be tormented with thirst. Little companies are sent out, in every direction along their way, to search for springs; but they all return with the same evil report, that none can be found. Often the interminable multitude may be seen halting and digging wells in the sand; but they are all wells without water. Many of the people are already beginning to show signs of anguish. The blazing sun above is pouring downright embers all

¹ Jer. ii. 6.

² Exod. xv. 22.

the day; and the burning sands below are sending back the scorching beams, and betwixt these two flaming fires they are almost consumed. Water! water! water! is the universal cry. But alas! there is no water. Slowly, silently, and sadly they press on after the pillared cloud, "faint yet pursuing."¹ The flocks are panting, the beasts are groaning, the cattle are oppressed, and millions of men, women, and children are positively perishing. Their eyes grow dim, and they are dizzy. Fever races along all their veins; and their parched tongues are cleaving to their mouths. They can scarcely speak; they can scarcely stand, but still they stagger on hoping against hope. And just here the good news, that their sufferings will soon be over, runs along the reeling line. Behold, the bushes yonder betoken something good! Yes, there is water there, for the slanting rays of the setting sun are glancing from its polished surface now. The very tidings are refreshing, and their strength is greatly revived. Their tongues are loosened, and their step seems quite elastic, as, with hope beating high in every bounding heart, and joy bursting forth from every lip, they hasten to their saviour spring. But stop! What means that mighty groan from the great multitude? What means this mourning and lamentation here? Why the water is bitter and they can not drink it. "When they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah."

¹ Judges viii. 4.

Similar disappointments often happen in the journey of life. There are Marahs, more than we can number, along the path of our pilgrimage. The places where we expect to find nothing but pleasure are only places of pain. When gray hairs are coming here and there upon his head, the prosperous man of business retires from the active duties of life; and hoping to pass the remnant of his days in elegant leisure, he builds a palace for his pride; but before the golden mansion is quite finished, an unexpected turn in the wheel of fortune makes him a bankrupt, and his last days are spent, as a sigh, in the poor-house.

"That righteous man"¹ Lot was rich enough before he parted with Abraham, but as his riches increased, he set his heart on them, and desiring to become still more wealthy he "pitched his tent toward Sodom;"² but he went from peace to war, from freedom to captivity, from the very gate of heaven to the vestibule of hell. From the first day that he set his face towards the cities of the plain he went from bad to worse; from honor to dishonor; from wealth to poverty. All his houses and flocks and herds were burned with "brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven;"³ and all his lands, and city lots, were buried beneath the Dead Sea.

When Naomi with her husband and her two sons emigrated to the land of Moab, she doubtless thought her prospects would be improved. And there seemed to be a good reason for leaving her pleasant home in Bethlehem, for the times were hard in Canaan,

¹ II Pet. ii. 8.

² Gen. xiii. 12.

³ Gen. xix. 24.

"there was a famine in the land."¹ But in the land of plenty, to which she went, there was nothing in store for her but poverty and affliction. There she lost all her property, there she buried Elimelech her husband, and there she buried Mahlon and Chilion, both of them. And when she came back to Bethlehem, so changed, her friends scarcely knew her; "they said is this Naomi? And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me."²

I have sometimes gone out of a warm afternoon in June, and before I returned the wind shifted to the north, and the weather felt as cold as any day in January. Such great and sudden changes in the temperature are always unfavorable to the health of the body. And when in one short day unlooked-for adversity comes in the place of prosperity, it seems like a little winter in the summer season; and the health of the mind is so badly broken that it can not be recovered. When we see a sorrow coming we are in a measure prepared for it; but when it comes in the twinkling of an eye we are overwhelmed; and if when we are looking for gladness, grief comes in its place, we are disappointed and distressed. A few years ago, I spent the Sabbath in a neighboring city where I once resided, and as I was entering the sanc-

¹ Ruth i. 1.

² Ruth i. 19-21.

tuary, a stranger put a letter in my hand which read on this wise:

“DEAR BROTHER:—Will you please come and see us as soon as you can? Yesterday we were expecting our only son. He was returning from Port Hudson with his regiment, and we have just received a telegram informing us that he died in the car near Buffalo last evening. Do come and see us. You do not know us, but we know you, and often attended your church. Our pastor is not at home, and we saw by the papers that you were to be in the city to-day. Do come and see us if you can.”

Guided by the address which was given in the letter, I went to see that smitten household as soon as the morning worship was ended. And such desperate sorrow as I witnessed then and there is beyond all telling. Such mourning and lamentation and bitter weeping I have never beheld either before or since. Had their dear son been slain in battle,—that is what they had been fearing, and they would have been prepared in some degree, for the sad tidings,—or if he had expired in the hospital, it had not been so heart-breaking, because such thoughts were often flitting through their minds. But he had passed safely through the perils of the war, and through the perils of the climate, and was on his journey home, and when his parents were preparing to receive him joyfully they only received his dead body in a coffin. “When I looked for good, then evil

came upon me: and when I waited for light, there came darkness."¹

The peculiar people murmured at Marah. It is a sad thing that they should have done so, but it is no surprising thing. It is just like human nature to complain under such circumstances; nor can we find it in our hearts to blame them in terms of great severity, as some have done. Indeed, we can not help sympathizing with them, and would be glad, not only to forgive, but to forget the sin which they committed at Marah. It is rather wonderful, we think, that they did not murmur sooner, thirst is such a cruel thing. But, to their praise be it spoken, during all those terrible days in which they found no water, it does not appear that they uttered one word of complaint. In our opinion they did not murmur so much for thirst, tormenting as that must have been, but rather because their hopes which had been raised so high by the sight of water were now so suddenly cast down by its unexpected bitterness. The transition was greater than they could bear, and as they dashed the tantalizing draught from their disappointed lips, we must not judge them too harshly, if for a moment they lost their temper, and "murmured against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?'"

It is interesting to notice, in this connection, that neither Moses nor God reproved the people here, as they did for similar sins committed on subsequent occasions. We do not mean to say that the Israelites are not worthy of some blame for murmuring

¹ Job xxx. 26.

at Marah; but we do mean to say, emphatically, that where God is silent, man should hold his peace; and especially when by pronouncing sentence on others he condemns himself. "Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things."¹

It is greatly to be regretted that the lessons of God's loving-kindness which His people had learned in Egypt, and still more recently, at the Red Sea, were forgotten so soon; and that while the song of Moses was lingering on their tongues, and the sound of Miriam's timbrel was still ringing in their ears, they should have spoken unadvisedly with their lips. But, in the judgment of charity, being almost beside themselves by reason of their terrible sufferings and dreadful disappointment, they should be excused and forgiven, for not cheering one another with the assurance that the same mighty power that made the waters of the sea passable could make the waters of a spring palatable. At any rate, we must pardon their murmuring at Marah, since without as much cause we all offend much more.

How often are we tossed into a tempest by the little fretting annoyances of every-day life! Sometimes the most trivial perplexity makes us angry; and, unable to endure the least disappointment, we murmur exceedingly. Long, long before we come to Marah we begin to complain, and when we get there, how frequently we turn and go away in a

¹ Rom. ii. 1.

rage! Having the same good guide, to choose all our changes, and the same mighty God to go to for relief, still we murmur. We murmur at our lot, and at the locality to which a kind and wise Providence has led us. This wilderness is such a dreadful place; this pilgrimage is so painful; and this cup is so bitter. Where shall we go? How shall we survive? and what shall we drink? When health, and wealth, and friends fail us, how frequently we are "found even to fight against God."¹ Instead of saying, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord,"² we rebel against His administration of our affairs as cruel and unkind. Instead of securing the sweetest peace, by submission, we only aggravate our sufferings, and make ourselves more miserable by murmuring.

We have known men to murmur more at the weather than the Israelites at Marah. The spring came too late; the summer was too dry; and the harvest was too rainy. When Cæsar made a great feast for his friends, and the day proved unpropitious, he commanded those who came, "armed and carrying bows,"³ to go out and shoot their arrows towards the throne of Jupiter. When Ajax was wrecked at sea, he is represented as standing on a rock in mid ocean shaking his clenched fist up in the face of heaven; and in respect of murmuring against God, many Christian men are no better than these blinded heathen. "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."⁴

¹ Acts v. 39. ² Job i. 21. ³ Ps. lxxviii. 9. ⁴ Luke xxiii. 34.

"Why do you ask me what I like?" said suffering Simeon on his dying bed, "I am the Lord's patient and I can not but like every thing." Such is the noble, lamb-like, and lovely spirit with which every Christian should welcome the sickness and the health, the sorrow and the joy, the adversity and the prosperity, that Providence may be pleased to mingle in his cup, knowing that "all things work together for good to them that love God."¹

Earnest and prevailing prayer was offered at Marah—Moses knew where to turn, and what to do, in the great emergency; and so when the murmuring multitude came to him for relief he went to God; "and he cried unto the Lord." He had learned by experience where help might be found. Only a few days ago, when the impassable mountains were on either side of them, and the deep sea was just before them, and Pharaoh's fifty thousand war chariots were thundering behind them, Moses went to God, and He brought them through "the midst of the sea upon the dry ground;"² and now, when a greater calamity is impending, he goes to God again. He does not tell the people to dig new wells in the desert, and try to filter the waters of Marah, and that, perhaps, in some such way they might get a little temporary relief. There was scarcely time enough for such expedients as worldly wisdom is always ready to suggest, because the whole congregation was at the point of perishing. A little longer and millions of dead bodies would blacken the desert for miles in

¹ Rom. viii. 28.

² Exod. xiv. 22.

every direction. But, "In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen"¹ that man's extremity is God's opportunity. Moses knew this, and, sympathizing with his suffering kindred, he carried their case to the throne. His faith was never feeble, and never wavered: no not for a moment. He remembered the great promise that God had made so many times, confirming it with an oath, that He would bring His covenant people into the land of Canaan: and therefore it was impossible that they should be left to perish, here and now, in this wilderness.

The prayer of Moses on this occasion is not recorded, but we can not help thinking that the promise and the oath of God were its burden and its argument. He prayed earnestly. The history intimates as much when it is said, "He cried unto the Lord." Besides, there was great need of earnestness now; and so "with strong crying and tears,"² this great saint made known his requests unto Him who is able to save, even "to the uttermost."³ I think I can almost see him on some neighboring hill wrestling with the Almighty. Now he prostrates himself on the ground, pleading the promise, and rising up, with holy boldness, he reminds God of His oath. Away yonder is the promised land, and lo, here thy people are perishing, O Lord! Wilt thou not do as thou hast said? wilt thou not do as thou hast sworn? "Do not abhor us, for thy name's sake; do not disgrace the throne of thy glory: remember, break not thy covenant with us."⁴ Then lifting up both his

¹ Gen. xxii. 14. ² Heb. v. 7. ³ Heb. vii. 25. ⁴ Jer. xiv. 21.

hands, as if he would rend the heavens with his wonder-working rod, he cries on God to come down quickly and deliver His people from impending death: nor does he cease praying till an answer is received.

From this interesting incident we should learn to pray in the time of sorrow. Marah is always near the mercy-seat, and right across the bitter spring we can join hands with Jesus. In every emergency we may go to the throne of grace, and, better still, we shall never go in vain. Oh how good it is to have "the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ"¹ to go to, when the waters are bitter, and cisterns are broken. "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it can not save; neither His ear heavy, that it can not hear."² And abiding "under the shadow of the Almighty"³ we can sing in all storms: "God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waves thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof."⁴

With "precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little;"⁵ the Bible teaches us to pray—"to pray and not to faint"⁶—to "pray without ceasing."⁷ Are any of you careful and troubled about many things? "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and

¹ Tit. ii. 13.

² Isa. lix. 1.

³ Ps. xci. 1.

⁴ Ps. xli. 1, 2, 3.

⁵ Isa. xxviii. 13.

⁶ Luke xviii. 1.

⁷ I Thes. v. 17.

supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”¹ “Is any among you afflicted? let him pray.”² “Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.”³ Are any of your hearts breaking, and bleeding, by reason of some recent bereavement? When John the Baptist was beheaded, “his disciples came, and took up the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus;”⁴ go thou and do likewise; “He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.”⁵

And here, also, for our encouragement to pray, when troubles press, we have the practice of the holy men of old, as well as their inspired precepts. When “our father Jacob” was expecting on the morrow to meet with his angry brother Esau, “he wrestled” all night with the angel, and the next day “Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.”⁶ Hannah was “a woman of a sorrowful spirit;”⁷ but after she had prayed and “poured out her soul before the Lord,”⁸ she “went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad.”⁹ When the city of Jerusalem was beleagured by the

¹ Phil. iv. 6.² Jas. v. 13.³ Jas. v. 14, 15.⁴ Mat. xiv. 12.⁵ Ps. cxlvii. 3.⁶ Gen. xxxiii. 4.⁷ I Sam. i. 15.⁸ I Sam. i. 15.⁹ I Sam. i. 18.

grand army of Assyria, and its fall seemed only a question of time, "Hezekiah prayed,"¹ "and it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead."² "In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death."³ But "he turned his face to the wall and prayed" again, and secured a second lease of life. "Out of the fish's belly"⁴ Jonah prayed unto the Lord, and escaped safe to land "out of the belly of hell." Just as soon as he began to be tormented with the thorn in the flesh, Paul took it to the mercy-seat and prayed that it might be removed. "For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And He said unto me My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."⁵

And, as if these, and many more that might be mentioned, were not enough, Jesus Himself in the sublimest examples of all history teaches us to pray in the time of trouble. Behold Him here in Gethsemane! See how He suffers! hear how He prays! There is agony in both, and as the "great drops of blood"⁶ are falling down to the ground the great petitions are going up to God. As He lifts the bitter cup to His pale and quivering lips, He prays that it may pass from Him. Again He tries to drink it, and again He prays that it may pass from Him. Once

¹ II Kings xix. 15.

² II Kings xix. 35.

³ II Kings xx. 1.

⁴ Jonah ii. 1.

⁵ II Cor. xii. 8, 9.

⁶ Luke xxii. 44.

people who first discovered what is now the Florida corrected the stagnant waters of that the branches of sassafras: and it is a well-known fact that the first use of tea in China was to purify the ponds and rivers of that country. More examinations of Marah have been analyzed, and a chemical examination shows that their bitterness comes from the sulphate of lime, which they hold in solution, and which may be precipitated by any substance containing oxalic acid; leaving the water pure and pleasant to the taste.

Of all that has been and may be said to prove we can not believe that this tree possesses such virtue as has been claimed for it. To believe the miracle, were it a thousand times more wonderful, than to believe that any tree has healing in its nature, could cure water for three millions of people, with their numbers and herds. We do not think that there is more healing virtue in that tree than there is in the "salt"¹ with which Elisha cured the waters of Jericho; or in the "meal"² with which he cured the poisoned "pot of pottage;" or in "the clay" which Christ opened the blind man's eyes. The healing properties were not in the clay, nor in the meal, nor in the salt, nor in the tree; but in God alone, and behind these apparent causes, lies the hiding of His power."³

¹ II Kings ii. 21.
² John ix. 6.

³ II Kings iv. 41.

⁴ Hab. iii. 4.

more, by the help of the strengthening angel, He brings it to His lips; and once again He pours out His soul in prayer, that it may pass, saying, "O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done."¹ And see Him yonder nailed to the cross on Calvary! He is suffering, bleeding, dying, but yet He prays. His last breath is praying breath: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."² "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."³

God healed the waters of Marah and they were good. In answer to the prayer of Moses, "the Lord showed him a tree, which when he had cast in the waters, the waters were made sweet." Long ago, the question was started whether this tree possessed certain inherent properties which cured these waters of their unpleasant taste; and modern travellers, some of them innocently, others doubtless desiring to find a plant to supersede the miracle, have sought for a tree possessing the natural qualities of healing the bitter waters which still flow from Marah. They might just as well look along the banks of the Jordan expecting to find a tree which, when cut down and cast into the water, would make iron "swim."⁴

We do not deny that certain vegetables possess the peculiar properties which will purify unwholesome water, and have sometimes been used for that purpose. Indeed, it is stated, on the best authority,

¹ Matt. xxvi. 42.

² Luke xxiii. 46.

³ Heb. iv. 16.

⁴ II Kings vi. 6.

that the people who first discovered what is now the state of Florida corrected the stagnant waters of that region with the branches of sassafras: and it is a well-known fact that the first use of tea in China was to clarify the ponds and rivers of that country. Moreover the waters of Marah have been analyzed, and the chemical examination shows that their bitterness is derived from the sulphate of lime, which they hold in solution, and which may be precipitated by any vegetable substance containing oxalic acid; leaving the beverage pure and pleasant to the taste.

In spite of all that has been and may be said to the contrary, we can not believe that this tree possessed any such virtue as has been claimed for it. It is easier to believe the miracle, were it a thousand times more wonderful, than to believe that any tree, however healing in its nature, could cure water enough for three millions of people, with their numerous flocks and herds. We do not think that there was any more healing virtue in that tree than there was in "the salt"¹ with which Elisha cured the waters of Jericho; or in the "meal"² with which he healed the poisoned "pot of pottage;" or in "the clay"³ with which Christ opened the blind man's eyes. The healing properties were not in the clay, nor in the meal, nor in the salt, nor in the tree; but in the Lord alone, and behind these apparent causes, "there was the hiding of His power."⁴

It may be briefly mentioned, in this connection,

¹ II Kings ii. 21.

² II Kings iv. 41.

³ John ix. 6.

⁴ Hab. iii. 4.

that the Jewish writers generally, so far from recognizing any inherent virtues in this tree, are of the opinion that its quality was bitter, saying, "It is the manner of the blessed and holy God to make that which is bitter sweet by that which is bitter."

Whether this tree was typical or not makes no matter: our thoughts turn naturally from it to the bitter death of Christ, on the bitter tree of the cross, by which our sorrows are sweetened and our sins forgiven; "surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows"¹—not our guilt only but our grief as well. He who hath the "righteous Branch"² within him, that man has a perpetual antidote against all the ills of life. Fast as the bitter thing comes rushing in upon him, like a flood, its bitterness departs, and all the waves and billows of sorrow are changed into a sea of glory.

The "Plant of Renown"³ possesses more than a magic power. Its touch turns poverty into riches, sickness into health, and death into life everlasting. It makes long afflictions short, heavy afflictions light, and bitter afflictions sweet. And if only the lost sinner could take it with him, "to his own place,"⁴ it would change hell into heaven. In proof of this blessed truth, we might point you to many of the suffering people of God, and ask you to listen to their "songs in the night,"⁵ and their "praises"⁶ in prison, persecution, and death; but we prefer to appeal to your own personal experience.

¹ Isa. liii. 4.

² Jer. xxiii. 5.

³ Ezek. xxxiv. 29.

⁴ Acts i. 25.

⁵ Job. xxxv. 10.

⁶ Acts xvi. 25.

When you came to Marah long ago, your soul hath it still in remembrance, and the waters were like wormwood and gall, what was it, but "the Tree of Life,"¹ whose healing leaves fell into the bitter spring and made a sweet cordial of your sorrows? And again, when calamity came upon you with all its crushing weight, was it not the soft and gentle hand of "this same Jesus"² that bound up the "bruised reed"³ it would not break? And when you were passing through the fires of some recent tribulation, oh tell me! did He not come down from heaven again, bringing "beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness?"⁴ tuning the harp of your broken heart, lifting up "the daughters of music,"⁵ constraining you to make melody unto the Lord, in some such glowing words as these, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."⁶

It is peculiarly interesting to observe, in conclusion, that God would not permit His people to depart from Marah till He had made a covenant with them; "there He made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there He proved them, and said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in His sight, and wilt give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon

¹ Rev. xxii. 2.

² Acts i. 11.

³ Mat. xii. 20.

⁴ Isa. lxi. 3.

⁵ Eccl. xii. 4.

⁶ II Cor. xii. 9.

thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that healeth thee."

We believe that the Lord led the Israelites to Marah of a set purpose to communicate important instruction to them there. On condition of perfect obedience, He promises to preserve them from the plagues of Egypt, which, in another place, are expressly threatened as the punishment of disobedience. And the history shows that "God is no respecter of persons,"¹ as the rebellious Israelites fared no better than the rebellious Egyptians. Nor is it less important for us to know that God will deal with us now, according as we keep His commandments. It is just as true in these days, as it ever was, that the path of obedience is pleasant and prosperous; "but the way of transgressors is hard."² There may not be the same outward and visible signs of reward and retribution as in the former time; nevertheless, "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."³

As a special reason to induce His people to obey His voice, and do that which was right, the Almighty closed the covenant with these words: "For I am the Lord that healeth thee;" and "as in water face answereth to face,"⁴ so in Marah the Israelites now saw themselves. It reflected their own image, and in its bitterness⁵ they beheld their own bitterness. Not their sorrows only, but their sins as well: "I am the Lord that healeth thee:" not only thy bitter

¹ Acts x. 34.

² Prov. xiii. 15.

³ Gal. vi. 7.

⁴ Prov. xxvii. 19.

waters by the way, but thee thyself. Thy body of its plagues, and thy soul of the sickness of sin.

And so, again, we are brought to Jesus, the healer of the hurt in the human heart. For, after all, the mind is its own Marah, and we carry about within us the bitter fountain of sin, which only Christ can cure. Of Him we read in one place, "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed."¹ And again in another place we read, "Unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in His wings."² If you are sick unto death, He can raise you up and give you length of days: and if you are sensible of sin He alone can make you clean: "None but Jesus can do helpless sinners good;" "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."³ Come then to Jesus, come just as you are, and come just now. Never mind tarrying to make yourself better, and say not to thy servant, "Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee."⁴ "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."⁵ Come now then, prostrate yourselves at the feet of Jesus and pray, and pray again for health and holiness; and while you are yet speaking your prayers shall be turned into praises, and you shall rise up singing, "Bless the Lord, O

¹ Isa. liii. 5.

² Mal. iv. 2.

³ Acts iv. 12.

⁴ Acts xxiv. 25.

⁵ II Cor. vi. 2.

my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with loving-kindness and tender mercies; who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's."¹

"Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen."²

¹ Ps. ciii. 1-5.

² Eph. iii. 20.

ELIM AND MARAH.

CHAPTER III.

"And they came to Elim, where were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm-trees: and they encamped there by the waters."
EXODUS xv. 27.

MARAH and Elim are both in the same chapter, with not so much as a single verse between them. And, over in the book of Numbers, they are spoken of in the same short sentence; "They removed from Marah, and came unto Elim."¹ They were together in the mind of Moses, and he just transferred them from his memory to his history.

Nor is it strange that these two interesting places should be so near together in the story of the exodus, because they almost touch each other in the wilderness itself. Both of them are in the same locality, between the adjacent parallels of latitude, and in the same longitude. They are so near together, that, in the neighboring lowlands, their waters may have met, and mingled, and flowed down in the same channel to the sea. Indeed they are only about six short miles apart; and had it not been for the intervening sand hills, while the people of Israel were murmuring at Marah they might have seen the palm-trees of Elim waving their friendly welcome, and saying, "Here is the best water in the world."

¹ Num. xxxiii. 9.

"Thus near to each other are the bitter and the sweet of life, the sorrow and the joy of time!" Both are in the same desert, and often follow each other in the progress of a single day. Deeply impressed with the close proximity of Marah and Elim, and the blending of the sorrows and the joys which they foreshadow, a recent traveller says: "In token of this we broke off a small branch of palm from one of these Elim trees, and laying it on the similar branch which we had brought from Marah, we tied the two together, to be kept in perpetual memorial, not merely of the scenes, but of the truth which they so vividly teach."

In our personal experience we are coming ever and again to Marah and Elim, and their waters are always welling up within us, to teach us the evil and the good of life. A Marah disappointing our desires to-day, an Elim more than meeting our expectations to-morrow—a dark shadow in our dwelling at noon, a bright light shining on it at evening time—a great calamity crushing us here, a sweet mercy coming yonder. And thrice happy would we be, if only we could endure patiently, and enjoy thankfully, those things which a wise and kind Providence is pleased to mingle in our cup: suffering as those who know that they shall one day rejoice: "Thou which hast showed me great and sore troubles, shalt quicken me again, and shalt bring me up again from the depths of the earth. Thou shalt increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side:"¹ rejoicing as those who

¹ Ps. lxxi. 20, 21.

know that they shall one day suffer: "In the world ye shall have tribulation:"¹ and blessing God for both the bitter and the sweet, because both are good, both are useful, both are indispensable.

"They came to Elim." Elim was a valley of considerable extent reposing, like an emerald gem, on the barren bosom of the desert through which the Israelites were passing. How glad they must have been to reach that welcome oasis! Footsore, weary, and heavy laden, there they laid down their burdens, unloosed the latchet of their shoes, and gave themselves to sweet repose. Having passed the place of patient endurance, they were now come to the place of positive enjoyment.

By all accounts Elim was a little Eden in the wilderness, and by far the loveliest spot to which the Hebrews came, in all their wanderings, till they came at last to Canaan. Besides, it was now about the middle of the month of April: so that they came to this pleasantest place in the wilderness, in the pleasantest season of the year. The winter was past, the rain was over and gone, and the time of the singing of birds was come. At every turn they felt the gush of vernal glee, on every hand they heard the music of God's own minstrelsy, and everywhere they saw the heavenly dress of the new-born year. The grass was sprouting green for miles away between rejoicing hills on every side; and, as the trees of the field clapped their hands, the showering blossoms fell and filled the air with fragrance, like as when an angel

¹ John xvi. 33.

shakes his wings to scatter down the smell of heaven. By the surpassing loveliness of the scene, who can doubt that the Hebrews were reminded of the good land of Goshen, which they had lately left, a very section of which seemed to have been lifted across the Red Sea as a resting-place for them?

Elim is still a pleasant valley, and quite a desirable resting-place with the Arabian desert rangers. As the traveller will often hold on his weary way, long after dark, that he may spend the night at his favorite inn, so these "children of the bondwoman"¹ press on, passing by all common stations, if by any means they may reach Elim, and rest awhile beneath its palm-trees and beside its wells of water. Most modern travellers speak of this region in the highest terms. We might quote the language of many, but one must suffice as a specimen of the whole. "There was even—delightful sight! a little grass, and birds were hopping about enjoying the rare luxury. The water trickling off, pursues its way some distance down the valley, forming a reedy marsh, interspersed with thickets of bushes and dwarf palm-trees, and a considerable quantity of tamarisks and other shrubs: and as there are also considerable masses of similar vegetation above this point, there are probably several other springs which nourish it. Altogether it was a reviving sight in the thirsty desert."

Along the path of our pilgrimage there are Elims, also, which seem like very Edens for their loneliness; where all is melody to charm the ear, beauty to de-

¹ Gal. iv. 31.

light the eye, and joy to rejoice the heart. And chiefest among ten thousand of these resting-places is the day of rest, "the Sabbath of the Lord thy God."¹ It contributed much to the happiness of our first parents in Paradise. As a remnant of Eden's bliss, it reminds us of the joy of our lost estate, and alleviates the sorrows of our present lot. It is also a sweet foretaste of the rest that remaineth for the people of God. In its brimming cup of blessing there is no bitter ingredient, every drop is sweet. It is one of "the days of heaven upon the earth,"² in which the tired body and the toiling mind may relax their flagging energies, and restore their wasting strength, by resting from their labors.

Without this green spot of shadowing palms, sparkling waters, and necessary repose, what a barren, boundless, dry and thirsty land this world would be! Like a bow always bent, how soon the body would lose its elasticity, and the mind its strength: and how few and full of evil man's days would be! But, blessed be God, we are not without the Sabbath yet. This spiritual Elim is ours still, and we trust that it will be ours regularly, till it shall be ours always.

The people found refreshment at Elim as well as rest: "They came to Elim, where were twelve wells of water and threescore and ten palm-trees." They doubtless did not remain long at Marah. The place was not inviting. The whole region round about was the express image of desolation, a "waste howling wilderness."³ There were no trees there to temper

¹ *Exod. xx. 10.*

² *Deut. xi. 21.*

³ *Deut. xxxii. 10.*

the rays of the smiting sun, nor little hills to break the withering blast of the desert wind, nor grass for the cattle, nor good water to drink; for as the springs of Marah are bitter now, and have been for ages past, they were not permanently sweetened, but only for the great emergency. Touched by the healing tree the waters flowed pure and pleasant from the bitter fountain till all the people had quenched their thirst, and then probably they returned to their natural condition.

But when the weary pilgrims came to Elim, there were palm-trees whose emerald crowns were casting friendly shadows for them; and little hills to shelter them from the suffocating winds; and tender grass on every side; and twelve wells of the purest water in the world. There the desert sun no longer scorched like fire, and the desert breath was changed to spicy breezes. And as the cattle went peacefully grazing along the valley; and the contented flocks were lying down at noon; and the many thousands of Israel were gathered in groups under the trees, or stood around the wells drinking freely of the blessed water, was it not a scene over which satisfaction smiled? The Lord tried His people at Marah, but at Elim He gave them real enjoyment.

Those spiritual Elims along our desert path are likewise places of refreshment as well as rest. At the week evening meeting, we "drink of the brook in the way;"¹ and from morning till evening of the Sabbath we draw water with joy "out of the wells

¹ Ps. cx. 7.

of salvation."¹ And so far as our spiritual supplies are concerned we have the advantage every way over the Israelites. As we have already observed, it was in the spring season when they came to Elim: and while the palm-trees never cast their long, green leaves, they only yielded their fruit once a year, and in the month of April they could shake down no sweet dates from their branches, because the buds were just bursting into full blossom. Even at Elim their food consisted of the cakes which they brought from Egypt.

But at all times, under all circumstances, and in all seasons, Jesus yields us fruit which is good for food. Nay, He is every thing to us. He is our bread and water, and wine and milk. Our refuge and strength, "as a hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land."² It was in the spring season of her love that the bride thus sung of Jesus her heavenly Bridegroom: "As the apple-tree among the trees of the wood, so is my Beloved among the sons. I sat down under His shadow with great delight, and His fruit was sweet to my taste."³ And in another place He is likened to "the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month,"⁴ which would make one hundred and forty-four harvests in the year.

We must go still further, and tell you that in the most special manner, Jesus yields us fruit every week.

¹ Isa. xii. 3.

² Isa. xxxii. 2.

³ Cant. ii. 3.

⁴ Rev. xxii. 2.

In the wilderness no manna fell on the Sabbath day; but "the bread of life"¹ cometh down from heaven more on that day than on any other. When by prayer and supplication we shake our sweet apple-tree, and the tree of life, behold, how fast the ripe fruit falls! "there shall be showers of blessing."² Nay, more, Jesus is our daily food, and in answer to our pilgrim prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread,"³ our present wants are all supplied. Blessed Jesus, "The eyes of all wait upon thee; and thou givest them their meat in due season. Thou openest thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing."⁴

The refreshment at Elim was abundant, "where were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm-trees." In noticing the number of these wells and trees we can not help remarking their exact agreement with the number of the tribes and elders of Israel. There were twelve wells and seventy trees, and as there were just twelve divisions of the people and seventy rulers, it is not strange that the Jewish teachers should have thought the numbers quite significant. As a curious and interesting coincidence the agreement of these numbers may be mentioned, but it is doubtful whether any special application should be made of them.

One thing however is very certain, the numbers were given in order to teach that there was abundant refreshment at Elim for all the children of Israel.

¹ John vi. 35.

² Ezek. xxxiv. 26.

³ Mat. vi. 11.

⁴ Ps. cxlv. 15, 16.

Water enough to quench the thirst of all, and trees enough to cast a kindly shadow over all. As in other places, sometimes, the definite is put for the indefinite number; so here, the number of the wells and trees is given, to signify that there were wells many and trees many: enough of both to satisfy and shelter the mighty host together with their cattle, and the "mixed multitude"¹ that followed the camp. And as the people wandered freely among the dense palm-groves, and through the green pastures which sparkled everywhere with the gleam of running water, not one word of complaint escaped their lips. No, there was no murmuring there.

In "the glorious Gospel of the blessed God,"² there is provision enough for a perishing world. In Christ Jesus there is "plenteous redemption,"³ and "He will abundantly pardon."⁴ And might it not have been in token of His abounding grace that He selected twelve apostles and sent out seventy disciples to preach the glad tidings everywhere. The fountain of His love is not like a little scanty spring in the sandy desert, round which thirsty travellers, with stony horror in their looks, have need to strive and struggle, soiling the water with their feet, and pushing one another away, lest it should be drawn dry by others before they themselves can get an opportunity to drink. Oh no! the fountain of redeeming love is not like that. But I will tell you what it is like. It is like a well of living water springing up into a

¹ Exod. xii. 38.

² I Tim. i. 11.

³ Ps. cxxx. 7.

⁴ Isa. lv. 7.

mighty, majestic, inexhaustible river, flowing deeper, broader, and purer in its onward course, and on the banks of which all the world might stand, and of which none need grudge lest, if others drink largely and freely, there will not enough be left for them.

Or it is like the holy waters in Ezekiel's vision. His heavenly attendant conducted the prophet to the door of the Temple and pointed to a little stream that "issued out from under the threshold of the house eastward;"¹ and they went forth both of them together and followed its wonderful course. "And when the man that had the line in his hand went forth eastward, he measured a thousand cubits, and he brought me through the waters; the waters were to the ankles. Again he measured a thousand, and brought me through the waters; the waters were to the knees. Again he measured a thousand, and brought me through; the waters were to the loins. Afterward he measured a thousand; and it was a river that I could not pass over: for the waters were risen, waters to swim in, a river that could not be passed over."

"And he said unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen this? Then he brought me, and caused me to return to the brink of the river. Now when I had returned, behold, at the bank of the river were very many trees on the one side and on the other. Then said he unto me, These waters issue out toward the east country, and go down into the desert, and go into the sea: which being brought forth into the sea, the waters

¹ Ezek. xlvii. 1.

shall be healed. And it shall come to pass, that every thing that liveth, which moveth, whithersoever the rivers shall come, shall live: and there shall be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters shall come thither: for they shall be healed; and every thing shall live whither the river cometh."¹

And better still, all people everywhere are invited and entreated to come and partake of "so great salvation."² The royal proclamation was sent out long ago, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."³ And as if the canon of Scripture could not be completed without the broadest and most blessed invitation of all, we have this crowning one in its closing chapter, "The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."⁴

Such are the Saviour's own pressing invitations to His abounding grace, and from the moment they are accepted He suffers us to lack no good thing; "no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly."⁵ He gives us our daily bread, and our daily grace. And often He gives us a change of fare, and makes a great supper for us. With His own hands His own table is spread in the wilderness, and furnished with the bread and the wine of His best love, yea with His own broken body and shed blood;

¹ Ezek. xlvii. 3-9.² Heb. ii. 3.³ Isa. lv. 1.⁴ Rev. xxii. 17.⁵ Ps. lxxxiv. 11.

and we have "a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined."¹ And that we may not feel bashful in His banqueting house, but perfectly at home, He takes His own place at the head of the table, saying, "Eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved."²

The children of Israel pitched their tents at Elim, "they encamped there by the waters." They doubtless did not remain long at Marah. There is a tradition among the Jews that they tarried there only one day, and there is nothing in the sacred history to contradict this ancient opinion. On the contrary there are some things which seem to confirm it. Marah was a place of great suffering, and great sinning, too, for the people murmured there. And glad enough they must have been in the morning of the evening of their arriving there, to see the cloud of the divine presence rising from the bitter waters and beckoning them away; and after a few hours' march they came to Elim, where they encamped for more than twenty days, as the context clearly shows.

For one day, at most, of suffering at Marah, God gave them, at least, twenty days of joyful repose at Elim. "Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God."³ The severity, how short! the goodness, how long! In the desert, destitute, and bitter region of Marah, He would not suffer His covenant people to remain for more than one day; but in the green pastures, and beside the sweet wells, and among the

¹ Isa. xxv. 6.

² Cant. v. 1.

³ Rom. xi. 22.

delightful palm-groves of Elim, He permitted them to encamp for twenty days.

We have often noticed how it pleases our heavenly Father thus to place one thing over against another. In the natural world there is an Elim over against every Marah—a fruitful valley beyond every barren hill. Those who go down to the sea in ships tell us that there is a calm after every storm, and that pleasant weather prevails. And we all know that the bright and sunny days are more in number than the cloudy and dark days. So, in the experience of God's people, the happiness which they enjoy is greater than the misery which they endure. Every Marah is not only relieved by an Elim, but the "time to laugh" is twenty times as long as the "time to mourn."

It was so with David, the man after God's "own heart,"¹ who after wandering seven years in exile reigned forty years over "the glory of all lands."² It was so with good King Hezekiah who after a few days of "pining sickness" was raised up from his bed of languishing and death, having received a second lease of life, for the set time of fifteen years. It was so with Joseph, and more abundantly, for after patiently suffering thirteen years in an Egyptian prison, he spent the remaining eighty years of his useful life in an Egyptian palace. The proportion varies greatly, but in every case happiness preponderates: "For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a

¹ I Sam. xiii. 14.

² Ezek. xx. 6.

little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer."¹

Our own experience confirms the promises of God and corresponds with the history of His people in days gone by. For the most part our sky is clear. It is only now and then that a little cloud goes flitting by, casting a momentary shadow across our path, and the time to weep is shorter than the time to rejoice. Indeed the tears are not worthy to be spoken of in comparison of the smiles. As represented in the Bible, weeping comes like a wayfaring man of a sad countenance, and knocking dolefully at the door, begs a night's lodging, and rising up early in the morning, leaves his blessing and departs. But joy comes like a friend, a member of the family, like an absent brother, perhaps; and with beaming face and bounding step bursts into the house as his own sweet home, and remains our welcome guest for many days; "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."² "Behold at evening-tide trouble; and before the morning he is not."³

But, yet, after all, though Elim was such a pleasant place, the Israelites were not permitted to remain there always: they only "encamped there by the waters." That charming valley was not the land of promise; Canaan was not in all that country: and leading His wayfaring people home, God would not permit them to cast away the cords and curtains of their tents, and gather stones, and cut down trees

¹ Isa. liv. 7.

² Ps. xxx. 5.

³ Isa. xvii. 14.

and build themselves permanent abodes: and so they only pitched, even at Elim.

There the twenty days of pure delight went swiftly by and soon were ended, and as the people fell in line once more, and followed after God's flying chariot, we will excuse them if they lingered in the green pastures, and looked back through their tears at the palm-trees, till finally in the dim distance, they vanished from their view; nor can we wonder if their hearts had taken root round those wells of water.

However much we may be in love with our spiritual Elims, we may not abide beneath their palms and beside their wells. How often have we desired to tarry longer in the banqueting house under the banner of the Saviour's best love; but we could not; "For here have we no continuing city,"¹ "no certain dwelling place."² We are strangers and pilgrims, "dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob,"³ and sojourning in our own land as in a strange country. Even Sabbath tents must needs be struck every Monday morning: and holiest communion seasons must come to a close. Everywhere the summons comes to us: "Arise ye, and depart, for this is not your rest."⁴

Amid all the changes, which the region of the Red Sea has undergone during the last thirty-five centuries, the two places which have been the subject of our meditation, Marah and Elim, have been preserved, and are still sending out their bitter and

¹ Heb. xiii. 14.

² I Cor. iv. 11.

³ Heb. xi. 9.

⁴ Mic. ii. 10.

sweet waters to be, as it would seem, a perpetual parable of life, which is made up of nothing but Marahs and Elims from its commencement to its close. The bitter, too, is first and then the sweet. Not first Elim and then Marah; but Marah first and then Elim. First the cloud and then the rainbow; the smoking furnace and then the burning lamp; the night of weeping and then the morning of joy; and these alternately all our journey through, till we shall leave our last Marah forever, and come to our eternal Elim—the rest that “remaineth.”¹

Perhaps some of you have never heard the reason why one of our southern states was called by that sweet name, Alabama. It is said that a tribe of Indians, the aborigines of our country, having been driven southward by the advance of civilization, after many months of wearisome marching, one day, as the sun was setting, lighted on a lovely country, a very sanctuary unviolated by the remorseless white man. There, on the banks of a broad and calmly flowing river, where their canoes might ply, as they supposed, unmolested for ages, and in the margin of a magnificent forest, where the deer were sporting like tame kids, the old chief struck the pole of his tent into the ground, and leaped up, exclaiming, “Alabama! Alabama!” here we rest: here we rest.

Dearly beloved, heaven is our Alabama, and when soon or late we reach that happy land, being assured that we shall go no more out, we can say with more significance than the red man, here we rest: here we

¹ Heb. vi. 9.

rest. This moving tent will then be laid aside, and we shall "dwell in the house of the Lord forever."¹ In heaven there will be no more Marahs, no more bitter disappointments, no more blasted hopes, no more broken hearts, no more bereavements: "And there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."²

How beautiful! how magnificent! how transporting! is the inspired description of the better country. Behold, how the waters, and the trees, and the joy unspeakable reappear in the everlasting Elim! "He showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it: and His servants shall serve Him: and they shall see His face; and His name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign forever and ever."³

"O sweet and blessed country,
Shall I ever see thy face?
O sweet and blessed country,
Shall I ever win thy grace?"

¹ Ps. xxiii. 6.

² Rev. xxi. 4.

³ Rev. xxii. 1-5.

JESUS, MY GOD, MY GUIDE, MY GLORY, MY LIFE, MY LIGHT, MY LOVE: I am in the wilderness; but blessed be thy name, I am not alone, because thou art with me here, to choose all my changes, to make the darkness light before me, the crooked places straight, the rough places smooth, and to carry me over every hill of difficulty. Thou art better than the pillared cloud, and the ark of the covenant and tabernacle of the testimony; for thou art the substance of all the ancient shadows; the ever-living, never-dying, and never-changing Friend, divinest, sweetest, best. Watch me, lead me, feed me, clothe me, defend me, support me, save me, and help me all my journey through, and bring me home to rest in thee. Hold thou me up, and then I shall be safe. Give me the sweet manna every morning, and that I may have the sweet sleep of thy beloved every night, put thy left hand under my head, and thy right hand over my heart; and for a change of fare give me thine own great supper. When I am weary, and discouraged, and desiring to die, and slumbering under the juniper-tree, wake me to something better than the prophet's baken cake and cruse of water, and give me the bread of life, and the pure blood of the grape, the wine that goeth down sweetly, causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak. And when at last, through thy great amazing grace, I shall reach the higher-life land, I will cast myself at thy feet, saying, O to me, the meanest, grant the meanest place among thy re-deemed, and I shall be satisfied with thy beholdings.

OUR LIGHT AFFLICTION.

CHAPTER IV.

"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."—II COR. iv. 17.

ALTHOUGH there is no attempt at literary excellence anywhere in the Bible, yet, there is no book which possesses so many literary attractions. It abounds with the best specimens of the various kinds of composition, and presents to the admiration of the world, the most beautiful and sublime sentences that were ever written. For the most part, its language is pure and simple, but many of God's thoughts are too great to be expressed by the strongest terms; and often the inspired writers were obliged to coin new words and form unusual figures of speech, and sometimes these are heaped one upon another, if by any means the exact truth might be conveyed to us and comprehended by us.

The text is one of these literary attractions, as many of you must have noticed. It engages, at once, the attention of the most intelligent reader and challenges his admiration. He may be an infidel or an atheist, but he can not help confessing, that this short passage of Scripture is one of the finest sentences which can be found in any language.

But the text is more and better than beautiful. Its

"apples of gold"¹ are more to be desired than their silver basket. In it our present and future state are contrasted, and the influence which the one has upon the other is plainly stated; and the excellent form of the sentence is less than nothing in comparison of its more excellent matter.

Probably no portion of revelation has been more highly prized. Its sweet and precious words are easily remembered, fondly cherished, and frequently quoted. Like a missionary angel, arrayed in a heavenly dress, it comes on a special errand to the sons and daughters of sorrow; knocking gently at the door of tribulation and anguish, it leaves its benediction, which makes the house of mourning better than the house of feasting. It has charmed down more rising griefs than there are hairs on our head: it has chased away more black doubts than there are stars in the sky: it has chained in their dungeon more thieving thoughts than there are sands on the sea-shore. With its heavenly balm it has bound up more bruised reeds, strengthened more weak hands, and confirmed more feeble knees, than all the philosophy of the world. It helped the noble army of martyrs to glorify the Lord in the fires; it has made happy the orphan's lonely home and caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. Nay, more, it pours the sweetest and the strongest consolations into the soul of the sick and dying saint, turning "the shadow of death into the morning."² Nor will its blessed mission be ended in the earth, till the last of the blood-washed

¹ Prov. xxv. 11.

² Amos v. 8.

through shall be crowned with "beauty for ashes," and go up out of all tribulation to that heaven where "they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more."¹

A theme so interesting in itself, which has done so much to lighten the load of poverty, sweeten the cup of sorrow, and which makes the dark valley the shining way to the New Jerusalem, is worthy of our prayerful study, and as it passes under review, we trust, it will prove profitable to all; and especially to those to whom it may be a word in season: "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

The sorrows of this life and the joys of the life to come are here contrasted by one who, through personal experience and observation, was better acquainted with them than any of the saints. Paul's trials were greater than those of other men, and his knowledge of the glory to be revealed was better, because he had been to heaven once: so that in the text he speaks of what he knew, and testifies of what he had seen.

The contrast is very striking. Affliction and glory are set over against each other: the affliction is light, the glory is a weight. The affliction is but for a moment, the glory is eternal; and not only so, but it is "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." The highest superlative form of speech was not strong enough to express his idea of heaven, and so the apostle has constructed the most inten-

¹ Rev. vii. 16.

sive, energetic and emphatic sentence anywhere to be found, and yet these weighty, well-chosen, and inspired words leave altogether untouched the boundary lines of the excellent glory. It may be experienced, but it can not be expressed: "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."¹

Affliction is any sorrow which may be sent upon us by our heavenly Father, such as sickness, the loss of reputation, or the loss of property. And here it is necessary to say, that while all afflictions are sufferings, all sufferings are not afflictions. The blow must come from the hand of God. Self-inflicted suffering is not affliction. A man may give his body to be burned for the sin of his soul, but it can not be said that he is afflicted, because he is the author of his own torments: if, however, he is persecuted for righteousness' sake, then his sufferings take on the character described in the text. Paul's sufferings were chiefly of this sort: they came upon him in the discharge of duty, because he loved the Saviour and served him for love: living only to preach His Gospel and glory in His cross.

Often our sorest afflictions are not visible to the world, nor to our nearest and dearest friends. There are silent, secret sorrows that may not speak and must not be spoken of; and these are by far the most common and the most crushing in their pressure. When Abraham was so strangely commanded to make a

¹ II Cor. iv. 6.

burnt-offering of Isaac, and so strangely obeyed, there was no human being to whom he might unburden his breaking heart. He could not speak to Sarah about the proposed sacrifice of her one only son, because she never would have suffered him to be led away "as a lamb to the slaughter;"¹ neither could he mention the matter to the servants, who accompanied him on the journey, because they would have rescued the dear idol of the household, and taken him home to his mother; neither could he speak to Isaac about the divine behest, because, as they climbed the hill, both of them together, the limber lad might have darted away through the thicket, and escaped for his life, "as a roe from the hand of the hunter, and as a bird from the hand of the fowler."² And now, as then, these dumb sorrows are the most devouring; "The heart knoweth his own bitterness."³

It is also necessary that these sufferings should be endured by the people of God. They must be "our" afflictions. The same stroke which is an affliction to the saint, and is designed to do him good, is a judgment to the impenitent sinner, and is sent as the punishment of some transgression. "Wherefore doth a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?"⁴

There was an ancient sect of philosophers who believed, and taught, that all things were fixed by fate, and that the fates should be submitted to without gainsaying: that, so far as possible, the passions

¹ Isa. liii. 7.

² Prov. vi. 5.

³ Prov. xiv. 10.

⁴ Lam. iii. 39.

and affections should be restrained and suppressed; that happiness consisted in the insensibility of the soul to pain; and that there should be no rejoicing over any good, nor mourning over any evil. And the degree of indifference to which the disciples of Zeno attained in contemplating the course of human events is very wonderful. The loss of their children they regarded no more than the loss of their cattle.

But we are not stoics; our hard and stony hearts have been taken away and we have hearts of flesh: hearts that bleed and break; hearts like the Saviour's own which sometimes overflowed with tears. And though we know for certain, that our afflictions are sent from heaven to make us wiser and better, nevertheless they are hard to bear, and often in the greatness of our grief, we seek a place apart to weep; and sometimes our sorrows are too great for even tears, except those which only the soul can shed.

But while our heavenly Father would not have us harden our hearts when He handles the rod for our correction and exaltation, we should never abandon ourselves to excessive grief, and cherish our miseries as if they were our choicest mercies: this would be flying to the other extreme, and could be counted scarcely better than to be "without natural affection."¹ When the hand of God is lifted up against us, we should look away from the present affliction to the coming glory, being assured that the splendors of the one will alleviate the sorrows of the other; "while we look not at the things which are seen,

¹ II Tim. iii. 3.

but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal."¹

What this glory is, of course we can not tell. Paul could not though he had seen it. When he returned from paradise, it was not possible for him to relate what he had heard and seen. And we, who have never been there, should never make the vain attempt to depict the blessedness of the "better country": "as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him."²

Nevertheless, we may know something about heaven now. In the grapes and pomegranates and figs which Caleb and Joshua brought back from Canaan, to confirm their good report of the land, the Israelites learned something about the exceeding fruitfulness of their future home. And, by the blessing of God, it is our privilege to have many a sweet foretaste of the paradise to which we are going. Almost every day, faith and hope are crossing the river, and coming again with perfect peace and perfect love for us. The constant indwelling of the Holy Spirit of promise is expressly called, "the earnest of our inheritance;"³ the real presence of the Saviour makes the wilderness a wealthy place: the weekly Sabbath, when properly observed, is a short segment of our everlasting rest; the happiness of heaven is nothing but the perfection of holiness, and its glory is only the ripe fruit of grace.

¹ II Cor. iv. 18.

² I Cor. ii. 9.

³ Eph. i. 14.

These two things, grace and glory, are the same in substance: they are only different names for different degrees of Christian experience; grace is glory in the blade, glory is grace in full corn; grace is glory begun below, glory is grace completed above. But though now we may know much of glory through grace, neither now nor hereafter shall we be able to comprehend it all. "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I can not attain unto it."¹ It will always be too wonderful, and we shall never be able to attain unto it.

In the high school of heaven we shall be ever learning, but we shall never complete the course of study, nor take the last degree. As fast as one mystery of godliness shall be explained, another shall be presented. "Things to come"² will be always coming, and always "things to come." We shall also advance in happiness and our joy shall be full, but the "fulness of joy"³ will never be exhausted. In the sacred science of mathematics there is a certain problem in which it is proved, beyond a peradventure, that two lines may be forever approaching each other and, yet, never meet. So we shall be always drawing nearer to God, in the holy joy of heaven, and God will be always drawing nearer to us; but while eternal ages roll, this prayer of Moses shall be thine and mine, "I beseech thee show me thy glory."⁴ As we rise from rapture to rapture, and from glory to glory, the scenes of bliss will be ever new, and the Lamb

¹ Ps. cxxxix. 6.

² I Cor. iii. 22.

³ Ps. xvi. 11.

⁴ Exod. xxxiii. 18.

who leads us along the crystal rivers of delight will be ever saying, as He said to Nathanael, "Thou shalt see greater things than these."¹

Looking again at the contrasting words, you will notice that the affliction is light and the glory is a weight. Afflictions are seldom light in themselves, and sometimes they are burdens too grievous to be borne. The Scriptures do not strive to soften down the blows by which our hearts are broken, and left long bleeding. They are spoken of as "much tribulation," and "great tribulation." They are often likened to the cross under which Jesus fainted, and on which Jesus died; and in one place they are called "a great fight of afflictions."²

The apostle's afflictions were any thing else but light. They consisted of poverty, and reproach, and scourging, and stoning, and imprisonment, and constant exposure to death; he drained the cup of sorrow to the dregs, and suffered more than any other martyr; yet he speaks of his afflictions as if they were light, and they were light and found wanting, when cast into the balance against the weight of glory. As this great globe of ours, with all its land and water, is but the merest speck in space, and so very small that it can not be seen from most of the stars, and so light that it is less than nothing in the scales of the Almighty; and as its circumference is but the centre of that greater circumference described in the beginning by the golden compasses of God: so our afflictions, overwhelming as they often are, and

¹ John i. 50.

² Heb. x. 32.

our greatest tribulations, are both little and light and the most insignificant trifles, when contrasted with the exceeding blessedness of heaven. "For I reckon"¹—observe how the apostle is speaking like a Professor of the highest Mathematics, as if he had been busy striving to solve the great problem, putting down the known and the unknown quantities of "things present" and "things to come," all of which were known to him, performing all the processes, and reaching at last this sublime conclusion—"that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

The Hebrew word for glory means weight, and as Paul was an Hebrew, and had just used a double hyperbole, which was the Hebrew form of denoting the highest superlative, that meaning of the word was probably in his mind when he penned this wonderful expression. It signifies something so heavy as to constitute a burden. It may refer to the marks and manifestations of royalty, such as the purple robe heavy with gold, the imperial crown heavy with diamonds, and the glittering sceptre heavy with pearls and all manner of precious stones. But though the glory is weighty enough to be a burden, it will never be burdensome. The sanctified spirit, and the "spiritual body" will be adapted to the excellent glory into which they shall be received, and shall enjoy those things which now they could not endure. We shall never be sensible of fatigue nor need repose. "There shall be no night there,"² and during all

¹ Rom. viii. 18.

² Rev. xxii. 5.

the everlasting day our eyes shall never slumber; our wings shall never droop; our hands shall never weary; and our feet shall never tire, as we enter into "the temple, walking, and leaping and praising God."¹ "The four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within; and they rest not day and night saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come."²

As we glance, once more, at the beautiful contrast, you will notice that our light affliction "is but for a moment" and the weight of glory is "eternal." Trials always seem long, and sometimes they are long. Often a single night of anguish appears of an interminable length. "When I lie down, I say, When shall I arise, and the night be gone? and I am full of tossings to and fro unto the dawning of the day."³ The weary, waking, weeping hours creep so slowly along we would like to give them wings to fly swiftly away. The eagerly watched for morning is so long in coming, it seems as if it never would be morning.

But there are some who have wearisome years appointed unto them. Poverty is their perpetual portion, and they are perplexed about what they shall eat, and what they shall drink, and wherewithal they shall be clothed: or adversity follows them unremittingly, never permitting the bright light to break through the black clouds: or they are always sick, from their birth to their burial, and never eat with

¹ Acts iii. 8.

² Rev. iv. 8.

³ Job vii. 4.

any pleasure. Some of the Saviour's patients, whom He so kindly healed, had borne their infirmities for a long time; one for "twelve years;"¹ another for "eighteen years;"² and still another "thirty and eight years."³ And occasionally we meet with those now who are tormented with divers diseases all their lives. As fast as one complaint is cured another comes. In all their days, which may be many, there is not a single day of rest, or health, or happiness: their life is a lingering death, and "the last enemy"⁴ would be more welcome than their dearest friend: "Which long for death, but it cometh not; and dig for it more than for hid treasures; which rejoice exceedingly, and are glad, when they can find the grave."⁵

Some of Paul's afflictions were of this kind. His bodily health, which was probably never very good, seems to have been permanently broken about the time of his conversion; and there was a thorn in his flesh piercing him day and night without ceasing, for more than thirty years. Besides, from the beginning to the end of his wonderful career of well-doing, there was no rest for him, till he sealed his testimony with his blood. At home and abroad, by Jews and Gentiles, he was hated and hunted, "as when one doth hunt a partridge in the mountains."⁶ And yet he speaks of these long-sufferings as if they were short and evanescent: "our light affliction which is but for a moment:" like snow-flakes on the water in the

¹ Mat. ix. 20.² Luke xiii. 16.³ John v. 5.⁴ I Cor. xv. 26.⁵ Job iii. 21, 22.⁶ I Sam. xxvi. 20.

month of May, melting as they fall; like flying meteors in the sky, that pass away before you can point the place.

And such our afflictions truly and actually are, when contrasted with the eternal weight of glory yet to come. "The last jewel of our crown is that it will be an everlasting rest." Our afflictions may be lasting, but they can not be everlasting. The longest road will have a termination, but the perfect love and perfect joy of heaven shall have no end. Forever and forever is the double twisted cord with which the bundle of bliss shall be bound up for the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty. "The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended."¹

The longest life twice told is but a moment in comparison of eternity: "For what is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away."² What were Paul's life-long sorrows when weighed against the eighteen hundred years of joy which he has already had in heaven? And yet these eighteen centuries are hardly long enough to be called the introduction to the everlasting rest, and the great apostle must be lingering still in the vestibule of glory.

¹ Isa. lx. 19, 20.

² James iv. 14.

But there is something more and better in the text than the interesting contrast which we have been considering; there is an important connection between the affliction and the glory. They are intimately related to each other, as cause and effect. The one is the procuring cause of the other; not the meritorious cause: we do not earn the glory by suffering ever so much; but we are prepared for it by suffering, as it was prepared for us. Our afflictions are sent upon us for a particular purpose: they are the special messengers of our heavenly Father; they are both His servants and our own, and in their friendly mission they are exceedingly efficacious and successful. They are the stone-cutters and wood-cutters, the masons and the carpenters: the wise master-builders and the bearers of burdens: the Bezaleels and Aholiabs who have charge of the construction of our "spiritual house,"¹ and day and night, in season and out of season, they are always busy toiling for us. "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

And in striving to show you how this blessed result is accomplished, it must be remarked that afflictions wean us from the world. Knowing the tendency of the human heart to twine itself around the things of time and sense, our heavenly Father admonishes us to set our affections on things above, not on things on the earth. "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man

¹ I Pet. ii. 5.

love the world, the love of the Father is not in him."¹ In the same spirit, and almost in the same words, our Elder Brother says, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."²

But the best of us give no earnest heed to these divine behests. Professing to have abandoned the pomps and vanities of the world, as our riches, and honors, and pleasures increase, we set our hearts more firmly on them: and not unfrequently the life that now is, engages more of our attention than the life to come.

Prosperity and spirituality are not congenial, and usually as the one waxes the other wanes. The richest Christians ought to be the best and most useful members of the church: relieved from taking thought for the morrow, they might spend all their time walking in the footsteps of the Master, "who went about doing good."³ But, as a general rule, those followers of the Saviour who are the most prosperous in worldly matters are the most worldly-minded. The burning and shining lights of poverty and obscurity seldom burn so well and shine so bright when set on a golden candlestick. When they were packing up their goods, to quit the lowly cottage, they left their "first love";⁴ and on the way to the golden

¹ I John ii. 15. ² Mat. vi. 19-21. ³ Acts x. 38. ⁴ Rev. ii. 4.

mansion they lost their testimony: "The prosperity of fools shall destroy them."¹ The gifts of God which should constrain them to love Him more and serve Him better rather hardens their hearts: they love their blessings so supremely, and lean on them so confidently, and draw so much sweet comfort from them, that at last they are deemed all-sufficient, and the bountiful Giver of them all is not in all their thoughts. "He made him ride on the high places of the earth, that he might eat the increase of the fields; and He made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock; butter of kine, and milk of sheep, with fat of lambs, and rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats, with the fat of kidneys of wheat; and thou didst drink the pure blood of the grape. But Jeshurun waxed fat and kicked."²

But, if these are the children of the kingdom, God will not forsake them when they forsake Him. If they will not hear His word, He will make them hear His rod: if they will not listen to the still, small voice of His Spirit, He will speak louder by His providence, and still louder, till they do hear. The Babylonish captivity was, doubtless, the greatest calamity that ever came on any nation; but it came because God's house was deserted, because His Sabbath was broken, and because He Himself was forgotten. Bad as the peculiar people were, their covenant-keeping Father would not abandon them when they abandoned Him; and so He sent them into slavery, to set them free from sin: and, after seventy years of suffering, when

¹ Prov. i. 32.

² Deut. xxxii. 13-15.

they were restored to their right minds, and their backslidings were all healed, He brought them home again.

After the same manner, our heavenly Father is constrained to deal with us. When we are tempted to say in our prosperity, "I shall die in my nest,"¹ "I shall never be moved,"² straightway the nest is stirred up and trouble comes. When we forget God who gives us all our blessings, He takes our blessings all away; when we forsake Him, He sends sorrow after us, in the chariot "paved with love,"³ to bring us back from our heart wanderings. And when we love the creature more than the Creator, He is so jealous that He takes to Himself the dearest idols we have known: "and, as the hounds easily follow the scent before the dew is risen, so God teaches us, while yet our sorrow is wet, to follow on and find our dear ones in heaven."

We have read of one who, in his outward estate, was prospered more than he ever expected to be. The gentleness of God made him rich and great; but he suffered the world to encroach so much upon his affections, that the ardor of his piety was sensibly diminished. The disease was desperate, and demanded a desperate remedy. First of all, the wife of his bosom melted from his embrace, but still he remained worldly-minded; then a dear son vanished from his view, but though the symptoms were more favorable now, he was not restored; then his crops failed and his cattle died, still his grasp on the world was not

¹ Job *xxix.* 18.

² Ps. *xxx.* 6.

³ Cant. *iii.* 10.

unloosed; then God reached hither His hand out of heaven and smote him with a "pining sickness,"¹ the world, however, still occupied too much of his thoughts; finally his house caught fire, and as he was carried from the burning building, he exclaimed, "Blessed be God, I am cured at last."

It must be observed further, that afflictions are sent upon us to develop our character. The mental faculties of many persons are so often drawn out and developed by the circumstances in which they are placed, that it has passed into a proverb that "circumstances make men." A man in easy circumstances, having enough and to spare, and nothing to do, is apt to float quietly along on the stream of time, and off into the ocean of eternity, leaving no track and making no sign. But if he had been placed in circumstances which were calculated to call forth the latent powers within him, he might have walked in a starry path to the highest pinnacle of renown, and placed the whole world under tribute to his usefulness.

So a Christian, who has nothing to try him, has nothing to make him such a Christian as he might become. His twelve labors made the Hercules: Antæus rose stronger after every fall to the ground. These fables are turned into facts in the history of God's suffering people, "Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well; the rain also filleth the pools. They go from strength to strength."² Vessels meet for the Master's use are not made without the fire and the hammer, and the best and most

¹ Isa. xxxviii. 12.

² Ps. lxxxiv. 6, 7.

beautiful of these receive the most blows. Moses was the meekest man, and Job was the most patient man, because their trials blossomed into these graces. "Tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience."¹ And Paul was the greatest and the most useful of the holy men of old, because he was the greatest sufferer. His meat and drink were "the bread of adversity, and the water of affliction,"² and these were better every way than the luxuries of the king's table. Sorrows were his very life, he lived in them and on them, and because he knew that they were so good for him, he was glad of them, and gloried in them. And not only so, but he entered heaven with a character developed "unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."³

Nay, more, we are taught to believe that Jesus was a better Saviour because He was a man of sorrows: "For it became Him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the Captain of their Salvation perfect through sufferings."⁴ And every one of these many sons is made perfect in the same way. In the saintliest of the sons of men there is much sin, and it must be removed; and God has chosen the afflictions of this life as the necessary means of purging it away, and preparing him for the glory to be revealed: "Lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth."⁵

¹ Rom. v. 3, 4.² Isa. xxx. 20.³ Eph. iv. 13.⁴ Heb. ii. 10.⁵ Amos ix. 9.

The builder goes to the quarry and selects a rough stone from the many that are imbedded there in mire and dirt: with blasts and bars and blows it is separated from its surroundings. Then for weeks and months the stone-cutters are busy about it, working on it with their hammers and chisels, knocking off the sharp corners, and squaring and smoothing it for a place in some royal palace.

That Builder is God: by the power of His Holy Spirit the living stone is hewn out of the dead rock, and lifted up out of "the hole of the pit";¹ and for many weary years sometimes, His spiritual workmen are engaged upon it with their iron tools, till at last it is "polished after the similitude of a palace,"² and builded in the "house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."³

The lapidary brings the precious stone into his workshop and holds it up against the swift revolving wheel, till all its dingy roughness disappears: he turns it round and round, smiting and smoothing its several sides, and in a little while it brightens and reflects the light in rainbow hues, and is fit to be set in the crown of a king.

That Lapidary is our dear Lord Jesus: with His own hand He takes the "daughters of Jerusalem,"⁴ rough, dark diamonds as they are, and holds them hard against the grinding wheel of great tribulation, and in due season they will be sparkling gems prepared for the crown of His rejoicing: "And they shall be

¹ Isa. li. 1.

² Ps. cxliv. 12.

³ II Cor. v. 1.

⁴ Luke xxiii. 28.

mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels."¹

The husbandman prunes the vine not to hurt it but to make it better and more fruitful: every year he wisely cuts away the barren and redundant branches that put forth nothing but leaves. After every trimming the strength and sweetness of the sap, rising from the roots, are concentrated in the few branches that are left, making them more healthy and productive.

"My Father is the Husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit He taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit."² He would not have the vines of His planting to flourish only with excessive foliage, and in order to cure this natural propensity, He comes down into His garden with the sharp shears of sickness and sorrow, and one after another the cumbering shoots are shorn away: He is looking for grapes, large clusters and of the best quality; nor will He be satisfied with a scanty harvest: "Herein is my Father glorified that ye bear much fruit."³

The refiner receives the precious metals fresh from the mines, and finding them mixed with many worthless substances, before they can be of much use to any body they must be purified, so he puts them in a fining pot and subjects them to an intense heat. When the whole mass is melted, a separation takes place between the precious and the vile, and the precious becomes more precious because it is pure;

¹ Mal. iii. 17.

² John xv. 1.

³ John xv. 8.

and just as soon as the refiner can see his image in the seething gold its purification is complete.

That Refiner is our Kinsman Redeemer; "He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver."¹ He takes "the precious sons of Zion comparable to fine gold,"² and casts them into the furnace of affliction, saying: "I will turn my hand upon thee, and purely purge away thy dross, and take away all thy tin."³ His own self kindles the fire by which they are melted down and all their sins are burned away; and when He can see His own pure image in their pure hearts, for which He sits watching beside the furnace, then they are sanctified wholly and may be minted into money, or fashioned into vessels "meet for the Master's use:"⁴ "Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ."⁵

The artist in taking your photograph makes what is called a negative picture first, and then with this he prints a positive. In the negative everything is reversed and just as wrong as it can be: up is down, right is left, and light is darkness. But from this mass of contradictions a perfect portrait is procured. From that in which all things are wrong—where the light of the eye is darkness, and the deepest black-

¹ Mal. iii. 3.

² Lam. iv. 2.

³ Isa. i. 25.

⁴ II Tim. ii. 21.

⁵ I Pet. i. 6, 7.

ness is gilded with the brightest lustre—there is derived the truest copy which was ever made.

That Artist is the Almighty: He His own self presides over the strange process by which our likeness is painted for eternity; He places us precisely in the right position, and so adjusts the light from “the Sun of righteousness,”¹ that every feature may be brought out in its perfect beauty. And our present life, with its clouds, its crosses, and its contradictions, is nothing but the necessary negative which He first prepares; and then from this He works out the exact likeness of our future life, where darkness shall be turned into light, sorrow into joy, and our crown of grief shall fade away in our “crown of glory that fadeth not away.”²

It still remains to be mentioned, that affliction will be the measure of our reward in heaven. We are prepared for the glory by suffering, as by suffering the glory was prepared for us; and not only so, but the glory will be in proportion to the suffering. That there will be different degrees of glory in heaven is both reasonable and scriptural, and so natural, too, that it seems almost like a self-evident truth. The flowers of the field are not all equally beautiful and good: some of them are arrayed in more glory than others, and send out a sweeter smelling fragrance. The trees of the wood are not all alike: some of them are taller than others, and have a greater girth, and are far more useful. The stars in the firmament are not all of the same size, nor do they shine with the

¹ Mal. iv. 2.

² I Pet. v. 4.

same brightness: some of them are stars of the sixth magnitude, and their light is so dim that it can scarcely be seen; while others are stars of the first magnitude, and shine like diamonds in the diadem of night. "There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differeth from another star in glory."¹

The same variety is just as manifest in the kingdom of grace. In the spiritual world, as in the natural, there are flowers of surpassing beauty, trees of greater stature, and stars of the first magnitude. "Now there are diversities of gifts:"² "Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?"³ Oh no! "Unto one He gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability."⁴ As members of the Church of Christ, we have gifts and graces differing according to our duties and our difficulties. It is worthy of some honor to be any thing, and to do any thing for the Master: it is honorable to be a deacon only, and serve tables; it is more honorable to be a ruling, or a preaching elder: "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine."⁵

And as the church in heaven will be composed from the church on earth, there will doubtless be as many

¹ I Cor. xv. 41.

² I Cor. xii. 4.

³ I Cor. xii. 29, 30.

⁴ Mat. xxv. 15.

⁵ I Tim. v. 17.

degrees in glory as there are in grace. All the saints in heaven will not have the same office, nor will they be equal in honor. In that commonwealth of kings and priests all will be happy, as happy as they can be, but some will be able to enjoy more than others. And all will be honored, but some will be counted worthy of double honor. Yes, there will be crowns with more jewelry, and thrones of higher dignity, and harps of sweeter melody. But who, who shall wear these crowns with more jewelry? and sit down on these thrones of higher dignity? and handle these harps of sweeter melody? I ask again, who shall be greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Are they those who were the greatest in the church below? By no means, because, "The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart."¹ The pillars and pinnacles in the temple here, may be nothing more than the doorposts and lintels in the house of the Lord on high, while those who are "less than the least of all saints"² now, may be the very greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

The eternal allotments of the last day will not be made so much for what we have accomplished as for what we have suffered. Indeed, I sometimes think, that success in life is not to be taken into the account at all. The last of the beatitudes is very significant: "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and per-

¹ I Sam. xvi. 7.

² Eph. iii. 8.

secute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven."¹

We are taught to believe that the minister's mansion in the Father's house will be very magnificent. In place of the "little chamber" on the wall, which he lodged in here, and which was so plainly furnished with "a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick,"² he shall have a large parlor there, exquisitely furnished, and superbly decorated with the Saviour's hand: and the minister himself shall be more glorious than his mansion; "They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness, as the stars forever and ever."³

And those who had no success shall be as highly honored, as those who turned many to righteousness. The prophet who preached to a disobedient and gain-saying people shall have as bright a crown as the apostle who was instrumental in the conversion of thousands: "For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not."⁴

Most of the missionaries, who first went to the heathen, met with but small success: some of them preached for six years, and some of them for twelve years, and some of them for twenty years, before they made a single convert, and some of them never made any at all; but yet, I believe, their mansions

¹ Mat. v. 10-12.

² II Kings iv. 10.

³ Dan. xii. 3.

⁴ II Cor. viii. 12.

will be much more magnificent, than those of their brethren who preached the gospel at home, because they made greater sacrifices for the Master and suffered more: "Them that honor me I will honor."¹

It is generally supposed that the martyrs will have the highest throne in heaven, and wear the brightest crown, because they so joyfully submitted to such unspeakable torments for the sake of Christ: they coveted the martyrs' place in heaven. But there are martyrs still, not of the rack, nor of the stake, nor of the scaffold, but martyrs of poverty and sickness and divine self-devotion; adorning the doctrine of God their Saviour in the unpoetic, common duties of domestic life, dying daily unto sin in ships, and prisons, and overcrowded tenement houses; carrying burdensome crosses over hills of difficulty in the valley of humiliation; and climbing mountains of sacrifice in shops and schools and kitchens and among the habitations of cruelty; unseen by all the world, yet all the while distilling the oil of joy from mourning, weaving the garment of praise out of the spirit of heaviness, and transforming the black ashes of their earthly hopes into bridal diadems of beauty. And these are the largest and noblest army of martyrs, and, in the day of disclosures, theirs shall be the "far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." "One of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence come they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said unto me, These are they which came out of

¹ I Sam. ii. 30.

great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."¹

A minister may be celebrated as a preacher, and wise to win souls; he may be another Apollos, "an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures,"² and thronging thousands, in many lands, may listen with delight to "the glorious Gospel of the blessed God,"³ as it comes from his golden mouth, and wherever he goes he may gather flocks of men into the fold of the good Shepherd. He may be an author, as well as a preacher, and his books may be translated and published in other languages than his own; and so his usefulness may be extended into every part of the world, and perpetuated to the end of time. But never having suffered much for the sake of Christ, he may sit in heaven far, far below some meek and lowly child of grace who, perhaps, could neither read nor write, and who was scarcely known, but through whose holy soul the streams of sorrow flowed most freely, calling forth faith and patience in their perfection of beauty: "so the last shall be first and the first last."⁴

Mary was an aged Christian, who suffered continually from rheumatism, and supported herself by selling apples and cakes and candies at the corner of the street. One day a distinguished judge stopped at the stand and thus addressed her: "Mary, my friend, do you not get tired sitting here these cold dismal days?" And she said, "It is only a little while,

¹ Rev. vii. 13, 14.

² Acts xviii. 24.

³ I Tim. i. 11.

⁴ Mat. xx. 16.

sir." "And these hot, dusty days?" said the judge. And she said again, "It is only a little while, sir." "And the rainy, drizzly days?" said the judge. And she answered yet again, saying the same words, "It is only a little while, sir." "And your sick, rheumatic days?" said the judge. And she answered once more, saying with the emphasis of earnestness, "It is only a little while, sir."

"Well, Mary, after this little while, as you call it, is over, what then?" asked the judge. And Mary clasped her twisted hands together, as best she could, and lifted up her weeping eyes to heaven and said, "Oh then, sir, I shall enter into the rest that remaineth for the people of God! there the inhabitant shall not say I am sick; and God shall wipe away all tears from these eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away, and there will be fulness of joy and pleasures for evermore. It is only a little while, sir, and all this shall be mine."

Dearly beloved and longed-for, men and brethren, sinners as well as saints, my heart's desire and prayer to God for you all is, that in a little while all this may be yours. And it may be yours: the strait gate is the gate of heaven, and the narrow way is the widest street in the New Jerusalem; and you may walk on the golden pavements now, rich in poverty, and sorrowful, yet always rejoicing "in hope of the glory of God."¹

¹ Rom. v. 2.

And then, last of all and best of all, when a few more days shall dawn and darken, when a few more suns shall shine and set, you shall see the face of your Beloved Saviour looking unto you from the window of the marriage mansion in the Father's house; and you shall hear his voice calling you by name, and saying, so sweetly: "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; the fig-tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."¹

¹ Cant. ii. 10-13.

ANTICIPATING TROUBLE.

CHAPTER V.

"And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?"—MARK xvi. 3.

IN His living day, our Lord Jesus encountered various classes of enemies; but it is worthy of special remark, and everlasting remembrance, that none of these ever included a woman. On the contrary, the women often provided for His wants, and were counted among His best friends and followers. As He went through "every city and village, preaching and showing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God,"¹ the twelve went with Him; "And certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils, and Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto Him of their substance."² It was a woman who washed His feet with her tears and wiped them with the hairs of her head: "Behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping, and began to wash His feet with tears, and did wipe them

¹ Luke viii. 1.

² Luke viii. 3.

with the hairs of her head, and kissed His feet, and anointed them with the ointment."¹ It was a woman who anointed His body beforehand for its burial: "Now when Jesus was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, there came unto Him a woman having an alabaster box of very precious ointment, and poured it on His head, as He sat at meat:"² and the house was filled with the odor of the ointment. It was a woman who interceded for Him when He was put on trial for His life. As soon as Pilate ascended the "judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of Him."³ Women composed the weeping part of the multitude that accompanied Him to Calvary: "There followed Him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented Him."⁴ Women were gathered round the cross when He was crucified: "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas and Mary Magdalene."⁵ "And many women were there beholding afar off, which followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto Him:"⁶ "And sitting down they watched Him there."⁷ Women formed a large part of His funeral procession: "The women also, which came with Him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how His body was laid."⁸

¹ Luke vii. 37, 38.² Mat. xxvi. 6, 7, and John xii. 3.³ Mat. xxvii. 19.⁴ Luke xxiii. 27.⁵ John xix. 25.⁶ Mat. xxvii. 55.⁷ Mat. xxvii. 36.⁸ Luke xxiii. 55.

These "honorable women"¹ never lost sight of their Lord till His body was laid in the tomb; then they returned to their sorrowful homes. But knowing the necessary haste with which the last rites had been performed, some of them proposed to come again to the sepulchre after the Sabbath, to dispose the sacred body of their Redeemer, in a more orderly manner, for the place of peaceful rest, which it had reached at last.

The Sabbath ended at sunset, and they spent the evening in purchasing and preparing the "sweet spices" with which they desired and expected to complete the embalmment already commenced. That night, how long it seemed! Its weary hours went slowly by, and held their eyes waking, as they watched and wished for day. They could scarcely wait till the fourth watch was ended, and so, when it was yet dark, as it began to dawn, "very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them."²

After they had started, and as they went, it occurred to them that there was an obstacle which might, perhaps, hinder them from accomplishing their pious and praiseworthy purpose. There was a stone against the door of the sepulchre. They knew that it was there: they had seen it there; but in the multitude of their thoughts it seems to have been forgotten. It was remembered however before they reached the tomb. They thought about it by the

¹ Acts xvii. 12.

² Luke xxiv. 1.

way; they talked about it by the way. It was the theme of earnest conversation: "They said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?"

There was much anxiety in their minds, and they could not help speaking to one another about it. I can almost see them in the early morning of that best day that ever dawned. They are coming near to the place which is called Calvary, and their faces are set towards Joseph's garden. They are going to the grave of their dear departed Lord, on an errand of love, bringing their sweet spices, "that they might come and anoint Him."¹ They are looking sadly; they are walking slowly, and at times they seem absent-minded. They are engaged in earnest, anxious conversation concerning the stone, which, they remember now, was rolled over against the door of the sepulchre. They entertain and express their doubts and fears about its removal, and think that, perhaps, after all, their "labor of love" will be in vain. But strange to say, they do not turn back. They do not even stop; but still hold on their way, hoping against hope; "perplexed, but not in despair:"² "and when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away."³ The difficulty which they anticipated was anticipated in heaven, and removed before they reached it: "For the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it."⁴

¹ Mark xvi. 1.

² II Cor. iv. 8.

³ Mark xvi. 4.

⁴ Mat. xxviii. 2.

Anticipating trouble is therefore the subject suggested by the text, and introduced to you by these preliminary remarks. It presents to us a richer harvest of thought than we shall be able to reap in half an hour. We will enter the field however and put in the sickle, and bind a few bundles, believing that we "shall doubtless come again with rejoicing,"¹ bringing our sheaves with us.

It is not always wrong to anticipate trouble. This is the first handful of grain that falls before us. Come and let us gather it up. And here we want you to mark our language well. It is not always wrong to anticipate trouble. It is often wrong but not always. If it were always wrong, then indeed, we would be sinners above all men, because most of our troubles are of this very kind. The real burdens of to-day are not so many as the anticipated burdens of to-morrow. The real trials of the present are not so overwhelming as the imaginary trials of the future. The sorrow that we feel is never so great as the sorrow that we fear.

"To fear is harder than to weep;
To watch, than to endure;
The hardest of all griefs to bear
Is a grief that is not sure."

We may be comparatively happy and prosperous in the present time; but we are looking to the future, and living in the future, more than in the present; and if we were looking forward with faith and hope we might still be happy in the anticipation of trouble;

¹ Ps. cxxvi. 6.

but these twin graces generally fail us, when we cross the margin of the present moment, and we are cast down and disquieted with visionary fears and groundless forebodings. "The slothful man saith, There is a lion without, I shall be slain in the streets."¹

We have no doubt that most of our trials would vanish away if only we could live literally as the Saviour has told us in this sweet Scripture: "Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."² And we would like to live so. But, then, there is no use of wishing, because we can not live so. We can not shut out the future entirely from our minds; this is quite impossible, and almost every thing we do has reference to it. And in the anticipation of some troubles at least, there is no sin.

Painful apprehensions of coming sorrow may be caused by the condition of the body. Our several members have the same care one for another: "and whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it,"³ and the mind suffers more than all the members. There is such an intimate relation between the mind and the body, and they sympathize so much with each other, that when we are sick in body we can not help feeling downcast in mind. What if this sickness should be long! who would look after my business? What if this sickness should be unto death! who would take care of my poor family? There may be want of faith in such troubled

¹ Prov. xxii. 13.

² Mat. vi. 34.

³ I Cor. xii. 26.

thoughts as these; but surely there can be no sin. There may be much sin however in former neglect to lay by in store something for just such emergencies. "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise; which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest."¹ "If any man provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel."²

What man is there in all the world who has ever thought of charging these holy women with sin for their serious apprehensions concerning the stone at the door of their Saviour's sepulchre? They knew that it was there, and by the way they wondered whether it would be removed. They anticipated trouble from it, and expressed their apprehensions to one another: "they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?" And in their conduct we can see nothing worthy of condemnation; but on the contrary we think they can not be too highly commended for their becoming anxiety.

Anticipating trouble ought not to turn us aside from the path of duty, and, when it shall be gleaned, this thought will form our second sheaf. These three devoted women expected to encounter a great difficulty. The stone at the door of the sepulchre might prove a serious hindrance to the accomplishment of their hopes. Indeed to their troubled minds it must

¹ Prov. vi. 6-8.

² I Tim. v. 8.

have seemed an insurmountable obstacle. But what did they do under these circumstances? Did they return to their sorrowful homes? No. Did they sit down by the road-side and weep, saying, "It will be utterly useless for us to go any further, because we will never be able to enter the sepulchre?" No. Did they hesitate about going forward? Not for a moment. They did well to think about the difficulty; they did better to persevere in the path of duty; and when they reached the tomb the stone was rolled away, and they saw a vision of angels, and Jesus Himself alive again from the dead and walking in the garden: and unto them it was given to return with joy, and bring the glad tidings to His disciples "as they mourned and wept."¹ God was better to them than their fears. He is always better to His blood-bought people than their fears, and when they are ready to perish He runs to their rescue; and there is nothing that surprises them so much as the wonderful manner in which He delivers them out of all their distresses.

When the children of Israel were going up out of their house of bondage, in the very beginning of their mysterious journey, they came into great trouble. The same night they reached the shore of the Red Sea, they discovered that they were so hedged about with dangers and difficulties that their doom seemed to be sealed. There were hills and mountains on both their flanks; the deep and wide sea was in their front; and an army of six hundred thousand men was

¹ Mark xvi. 10.

in their rear. What shall they do? which way shall they fly? how shall they escape? To turn to the right hand or to the left would be impossible, to advance would be self-destruction, and to retreat would be equally disastrous.

Under these circumstances it is no marvel that they began to murmur and talk about their graves, saying to Moses, "Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness?"¹ "And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord."² "And the Lord said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward."³ Go forward! what solemn mockery! what downright madness, to march straight into the raging sea and drown and die! But it was not mockery nor madness; nay, what seemed the way of death was the way of life; for as they went forward the sea fled before them. On either side, the waves of water stood still, the one above the other, like stones of solid masonry, and all the people went through to the other side without wetting the soles of their feet; "By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land: which the Egyptians assaying to do were drowned."⁴

It was a time of desperate sorrow in the royal palace at Shushan and in all the city, and throughout all the provinces of the Persian empire when that bloody edict, consigning the Jews to destruction, was

¹ Exod. xiv. 11.

² Exod. xiv. 13.

³ Exod. xiv. 15.

⁴ Heb. xi. 29.

signed and sealed and sent out by the king into every part of his vast realm reaching "from India even unto Ethiopia."¹ By a law of the kingdom the decree, thus ratified and published, could not be changed. By the language of the dreadful document the very day was set for the slaughter: and, speaking after the manner of men, the hated Hebrews were as good as dead. In the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the dominion the "people scattered abroad,"² read their doom in these words of the royal proclamation: "to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month."³

But on the side of the oppressed was Omnipotence, and the hated Hebrews were His own peculiar people; "of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came;"⁴ and in His good providence He had brought "a great woman"⁵ to the kingdom for such a time as this, and Esther was her name. Till recently she had been a stranger in a strange land and a slave; but now her home was in the king's house at Shushan, and she was the queen, and shared "a great crown of gold"⁶ with her husband.

The scattered people had a friend at court—one of their own number represented them there. The emergency was great, but this handmaid of the Lord was equal to it. Queen Esther counted the cost and

¹ Esth. i. 1.

² Esth. iii. 13.

³ II Kings iv. 8.

⁴ Esth. iii. 8.

⁴ Rom. ix. 5.

⁶ Esth. viii. 15.

nably resolved to sacrifice her own life, if it must be so, for the salvation of her people. Whichever way she looked death was impending. As she belonged to the proscribed race, she must perish with them, if they perished. To go into the king's presence unbidden she might die; and should he not hold out the golden sceptre to her she must die.

Such was the situation, desperate enough, indeed; but after days of fasting and prayer, the brave and beautiful queen, with her life in her hand and her foot on her grave, passes into the king's apartment of the palace, saying, "If I perish, I perish."¹ Astonished and alarmed at the unbidden and unexpected presence of her most gracious majesty, "the nobles and princes of the provinces"² stand aside, and up through the shining ranks she presses boldly to the throne, and prostrates herself at her husband's feet; and as the golden sceptre is extended her fears take flight. She has gained her life, and shall gain it again, and the life of her nation as well. Her beloved husband and her heavenly Bridegroom were both better to her than her fears.

As Christian men and women we have a journey to go and a work to do for the Master, and in striving to accomplish these we may expect to meet with many difficulties; but no matter how many, nor how great they may be, we ought not to turn aside from the path of duty. "The children of Ephraim, being armed and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle."³ That was a cowardly thing for the children

¹ Esth. iv. 16.

² Esth. i. 3.

³ Ps. lxxviii. 9.

of Ephraim to do, in the day of battle, when they were expected to advance against the enemy. But it would be no less cowardly for us to turn aside from the discharge of our duty when it would be difficult, and perhaps dangerous.

Our difficulties are good school-masters; they teach us how little we know, how weak we are, and where our strength lies; and as bodily exercise and buffetting the storm makes us stronger and stronger, so by striving to overcome obstacles, which seem an overmatch for us, we develop our spiritual strength. And if only we will persevere, and still press on with full purpose of heart to encounter the anticipated difficulty, before we reach it, it may vanish from our view, and if it should not, God's grace shall be sufficient for us, making us more than equal to the greatest emergency. "In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us."¹

Years ago, in this region of country, there was a total eclipse of the sun. It was very unexpected, and night coming at noon caused great consternation among the common people; and the hearts of even the wisest men were failing them for fear. The legislature of a neighboring state was in session at the time, and the sudden darkness surprised the members very much, and actually interrupted their proceedings. Some said one thing and some another, and many of them wanted to adjourn, when one of them arose in his place and said: "Mr. Speaker, either the day of judgment has come or it has not come; if it has not

¹ Rom. viii. 37.

come, there is no need to adjourn, and if it has come, I, for one, prefer to be found in my place in the discharge of my duty when the Master appears. I therefore move you that candles be brought, and that we proceed with our business." This motion prevailed immediately, the candles were procured and lighted, and the business went on as usual; and in a little while the temporary darkness disappeared.

The heroic determination of that noble man is the spirit with which we should address ourselves to the duties that devolve upon us; determined to persevere in the chosen way of God no matter how steep or rough or thorny it may be; delayed by no darkness, daunted by no disaster, distressed by no difficulty; and so pressing on through night and winter and storm we shall find that the path of duty is the path of honor. Let us decline to walk therein, by reason of its difficulty, and we will miss magnificent results which would more than make amends for all our toils. Through darkness and distress the way to light and glory lies. "I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not: I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them."¹

Had these holy women entertained their fears, and refused to go any further by reason of the stone at the door of the sepulchre, behold, how much joy and peace and honor they would have missed! They would have missed a vision of angels; they would

¹ Isa. xlii. 16.

have missed a pleasant interview with Jesus Himself; they would have missed the special honor of being sent to announce the resurrection to the world. Their best hopes were far exceeded in the glorious results of their visit to the Saviour's tomb. They hardly expected to be able to embalm the dead body of their Beloved; but they beheld Him alive: they saw His face, and heard His voice, and with great joy they departed, "and did run to bring His disciples word."¹

In like manner, with fear and trembling we may address ourselves to the duties which devolve upon us as Christians. To speak a word for Christ, or to give "a cup of cold water only,"² in His name may be all that we can do. And in our sight these may seem like small things, and we may feel sorry that we can do no more; but no man on earth, nor angel in heaven, can tell the magnificent results that may follow such feeble efforts. Not unfrequently we are permitted, even here, to reap an hundred-fold from such poor sowing. The word fitly spoken was quite forgotten till we found it again in the heart of a friend to whom it proved a word in season; and the cup of cold water only came back in a crown of rejoicing more to be desired than any royal diadem.

When persevering in the path of duty, anticipating many and great difficulties, and hoping against hope, how often has God met us with pleasant surprises! How often has He been better to us than our fears! better even than our faith, doing more for us than we

¹ Mat. xxviii. 8.

² Mat. x. 42.

were able to believe! We can never tell how much our poorest works may be glorified by the Master, nor what great wages He may be pleased to pay for our smallest services.

One day when Jesus was in the temple, sitting over against the treasury, He saw the people coming with their offerings: "and many that were rich cast in much. And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing."¹ Many poor widows would have been ashamed to contribute so little, and she doubtless felt sorry that her offering was so small. But Christ proclaimed the truth when He said, "This poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: for all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living." "Little sometimes weighs more than much."

When Mary of Bethany poured the precious ointment on her Saviour's head she did it as a simple expression of her personal love. She had no thought that she was anointing Him beforehand for His burial; and that her loving-kindness would be commended so much and remembered so long and told throughout the whole world "for a memorial of her."²

When the disciples were in a desert place with Jesus and the multitude was great, and there was nothing for them to eat, none of them but Andrew noticed the lad with his basket of barley loaves, and even he seems to have thought very little of them,

¹ Mark xii. 41, 42.

² Mark xiv. 9.

for he speaks about them with something like disdain: "There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?"¹ But the Master commanded them to be brought to Him, and when He had blest them He broke them, and passing through His wonder-working hands they multiplied and grew till they fed "about five thousand men, beside women and children";² and when all was over "they took up of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full." So our smallest gifts, and our feeblest efforts, may result in greater good and greater glory than we had dared to hope, if only they are given and done for Him who is able to do with them, "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think."³

Anticipating trouble ought not to destroy our trust in God; it should rather increase our faith, and this will bring us to the end of our barley harvest. In the case now passing under review these women seem to have been thoroughly assured that the stone would be taken away by somebody. "It was very great;"⁴ and in their womanly weakness they did not think of removing it themselves. They did not say to one another, How shall we roll it away: but, "Who shall roll us away the stone?" It was sealed: in some way Pilate's seal was affixed thereon making it a capital crime to attempt its removal; "so they went and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone."⁵ It was also watched: "setting a watch." A band of

¹ John vi. 9.

² Mat. xiv. 21.

³ Eph. iii. 20.

⁴ Mark xvi. 4.

⁵ Mat. xxvii. 66.

steel-clad soldiers was put on guard at the grave to prevent any one from taking it away. And yet, notwithstanding all these anticipated difficulties, their trust was not destroyed. By faith these women went unto the sepulchre, notwithstanding the seal, and not fearing the soldiers, accounting that God was able to roll away the stone; and their faith was honored abundantly. And this simple trust in God, which they manifested so much, is what we most need for our comfort and support. The want of it makes us anxious and unhappy, "careful and troubled about many things."¹ We are thinking too much for ourselves when we ought to let God think for us altogether; saying, what shall we eat, and what shall we drink and wherewithal shall we be clothed? when God sows for us, and reaps for us, and weaves for us. We are forgetful of Him and fly from Him in the cloudy and dark day, when this should be the clinging language of our cleaving heart: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."²

If we are Christians, our sorrows should strengthen our faith, because trials, whether present or in prospect, are the best food for faith. Believing is easy enough when there is nothing else that we can do. When it is so dark that we can not see to walk by sight, we can see better to walk by faith, and total darkness is faith's best telescope. When we are rich and prosperous, and our health is good, there is very little room for the exercise of faith. But when sickness comes, and adversity, and poverty, then faith

¹ Luke x. 41.

² Job xiii. 15.

risers and shines clear as a star, when only one is shining in the sky. When all the natural sources of comfort fail us, and the nether springs are dry, we will betake ourselves to the upper springs, the fountain that never fails. When there is no one else to look to, and lean on, we can not help looking to God and leaning on Him. And blessed be His glorious name forever, "none of them that trust in Him shall be desolate."¹ The relation which we sustain to Him, and the promises He has made to us, ought to increase our confidence in Him, and minister strong consolation whatever betide.

Why, just think what God is to us! God the Father is our rich Father, and "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him."² And God the Son is our Elder Brother, and our best friend: a friend in winter as well as summer, a friend who loveth at all times, a brother "born for adversity."³ And God the Holy Ghost is our best Comforter; and when troubles rise, and storms appear, the Heavenly Dove makes haste to come down on swiftest wings, to be beforehand in our hearts, to fill them with perfect peace, and fortify them against future fears. When we walk in darkness, the Three in One is our glorious light; and when we walk in danger, the One in Three is our strong defence: "For the Lord God is a sun and shield: the Lord will give grace and glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk

¹ Ps. xxxiv. 22.² Mat. vii. 11.³ Prov. xvii. 17.

uprightly. O Lord God of hosts, blessed is the man that trusteth in thee."¹

Let us learn therefore, dearly beloved, to trust in God and in Him alone. Let us be persuaded to look away from all others, and from ourselves also, and to look always to Him, and He will be the strength of our weakness, the light of our darkness, and the joy of our sorrow. Without this child-like trust in our heavenly Father, we are nothing, and can do nothing and endure nothing. But with it, we are omnipotent and can do all things and endure all things. Faith's hands are strong enough to roll away the greatest stones and remove the highest mountains: "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you."² "Lord, Increase our faith."³

The conclusion of the whole matter may be briefly stated in these words of the apostle, "Rejoice in the Lord always:"⁴ with this text you may now bind our sheaves together and carry them home, and go on your way rejoicing.

Cheerfulness is a Christian duty, and it is delightful to know that joy and peace are among the first fruits of the Spirit, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace."⁵ These should be cherished and cultivated because they are indispensable to our happiness and usefulness, and we might have them always, if only

¹ Ps. lxxxiv. 11, 12.

² Mat. xvii. 20.

³ Luke xvii. 5.

⁴ Phil. iv. 4.

⁵ Gal. iv. 22.

we would live constantly casting ourselves upon Him who careth for us. The peace of faith is the greatest peace, it is perfect and passeth all understanding; and the joy of faith is the greatest joy, it is "unspeakable and full of glory."¹ Each of these graces is better than good, and in substance they are the same. Peace is love reposing in the soul, and joy is love exulting there; and cheerfulness is the well-chosen word that binds the two together.

As, therefore, Jesus said to His disciples in the storm, "Be of good cheer,"² so say I to you. Be of good cheer always and everywhere, in your darkest nights and deepest griefs, and in the wildest winter weather. When the United States fleet stood off the coast of North Carolina, the water was troubled and exceedingly tossed, by reason of a great wind that blew, and it was night; but as the waves rose, in their rage, they became phosphorescent, and changed the stormy sea into a sea of glory; so your brightest joys should leap up out of the very sorrows of your souls.

The bird that soars the highest builds her nest upon the ground; and the bird that sings the sweetest sings in the night; and when we are sinking down in the dark depths, by the grace of God, we may rise above them and soar away, higher than the skylark, up into the brightest shining of the Sun of righteousness, singing, as we soar, sweeter than the night-ingale: "Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the

¹ I Pet. 1, 8.

² Mat. xiv. 27.

flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and He will make my feet like hinds' feet, and He will make me to walk upon mine high places."¹

Along the pathway of Christian experience there is a lofty plain where all is peace: a lovely land of Beulah where the air is sweet and pleasant and the birds are always singing; where the flowers never fade and the sun is always shining; where Giant Despair can never enter, and from which Doubting Castle can not be so much as seen. In the Pilgrim's Progress this happy land is properly located near the end of the pilgrimage, because the most of Christians never reach it till the journey is almost over; nevertheless there are some who come to it much sooner; and this is a faithful saying, if only our trust in God was strong enough, the very next step would bring us into that blessed land, and we might dwell there with great delight all the days of our lives. "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee."²

When tribulations abound, we long for heaven: for the peace and joy of heaven. But though we can not have heaven itself, Faith and Hope—our good spies, like Caleb and Joshua—may go before us, and search out the land of praises, and bring us back as much as they can carry of its peace and joy, and more than we can bear: as is illustrated in the experience of an

¹ Hab. iii. 17-19.

² Isa. xxvi. 3.

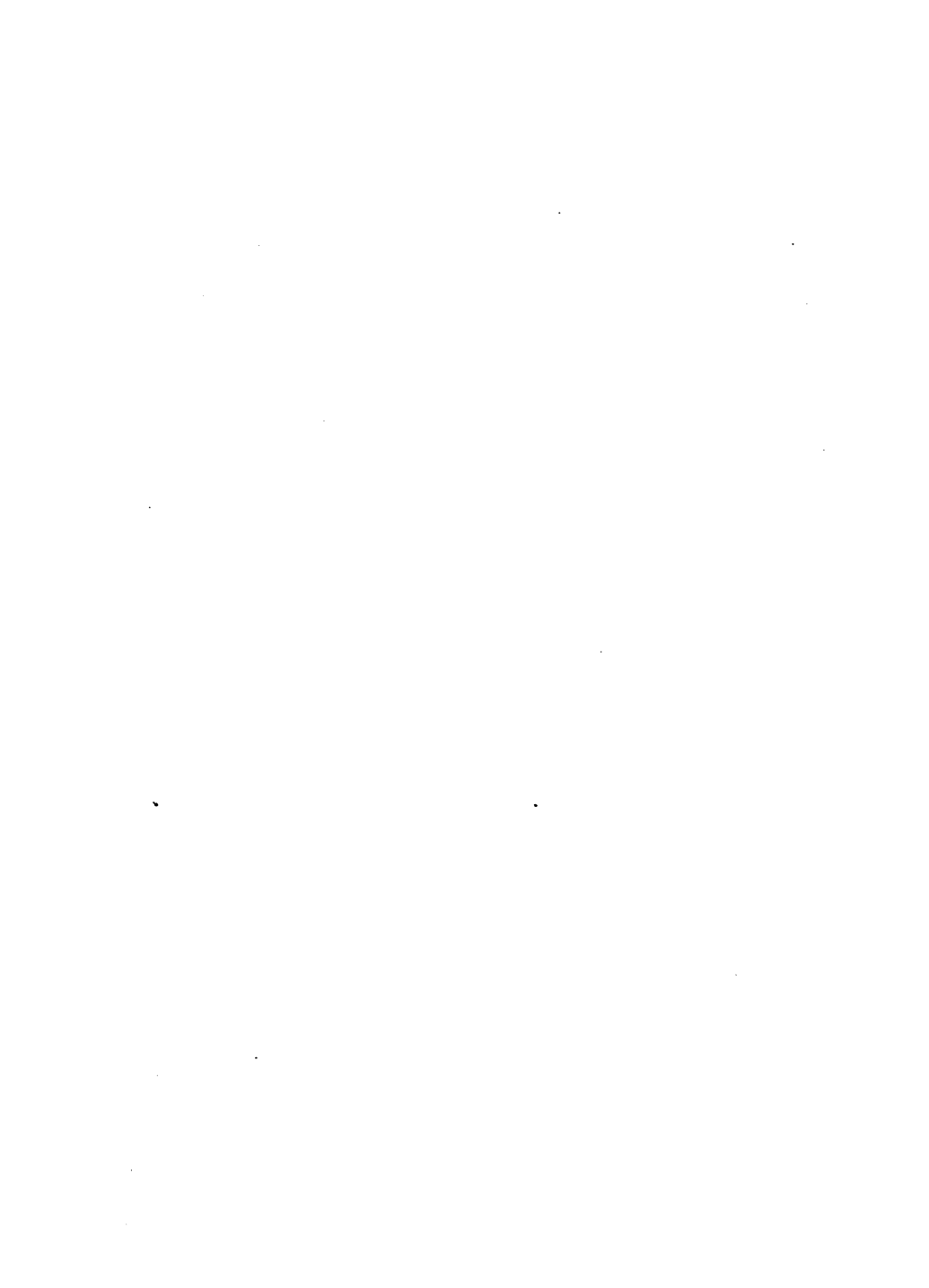
Indian saint, who under the power of full assurance was heard saying in his prayer, "O, my God, do not for pity so overjoy me! if I must still live and have such consolations do take me to heaven." Such happiness may be ours now, and for us to go through this world, doubting, desponding, and despairing like strangers and slaves and prisoners, casting shadows on the shining way, is bringing reproach on our holy and happy religion. As it has been well said, "It is impious for a good man to be sad;" therefore I say unto you, "Rejoice in the Lord always."¹ What then? "and again I say, Rejoice."

"The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace."²

¹ Phil. iv. 4.

² Num. vi. 24-26.

OUR SURE SUPPLIES.



CHAPTER VI.

"My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus."—PHIL. iv. 19.

"**E**VERY house is builded by some man; but He that built all things is God."¹ "For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead."² Along every road, in every field, and on every side, we see the footprints of a mighty God, "and the firmament showeth His handywork."³

We do not need the Bible to learn the doctrine of the Divine existence. We have only to open our eyes, and we will see God's name written so plain on every page of the book of creation that those who run may read it, and "the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein."⁴ Nay, more, if we had been born blind and deaf and dumb we could feel after God and find Him in our own being and give Him glory. "I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well."⁵

The stars, the rainbow, and the flowers, these are the big, the bright, and the beautiful letters that spell the name of God; and the rumbling thunder, the raging sea, and the rushing wind pronounce it.

¹ Heb. iii. 4.

² Rom. i. 20.

³ Ps. xix. 1.

⁴ Isa. xxxv. 8.

⁵ Ps. cxxxix. 14.

"The meanest pin in nature's frame
Marks out some letter of His name.
Across the earth, around the sky,
There's not a spot in deep, on high,
Where the Creator hath not trod,
And left the footsteps of a God."

Oh yes! there are a thousand evidences of the Divine existence. They are in the heights above and in the depths below. The heavens and the earth are full of them, and it is an easy thing to say, God; we can not help saying it. Heathen men can not help saying it, because they see and feel and know that God is. But though it be so easy to say, God, it is not so easy to say, my God. Every man can say, God, but every man can not say, my God. There are some people who would give all that they possess if they could address the Almighty with so much assurance, and with such personal language of appropriating love as this: "The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my strength, and my high tower."¹ They believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord, and in the Holy Ghost. But kneeling on their knees and lifting up their clasped hands to the holy place where His honor dwelleth they can not say, "This God is our God forever and ever: He will be our guide even unto death."²

Yes, any body, and every body, can say, God; but

¹ Ps. xviii. 2.

² Ps. xlvi. 14.

only the Christian can say, my God. We trust there are many Christians here, who can make all their own, these bold words with which the text begins. To all such we are coming with a message from heaven. Our text is a bundle of myrrh, and, dearly beloved, having brought it to you, we now propose to unbind it for you, that you may taste and see how sweet and comforting are its several thoughts, and that by them you may be encouraged to go on your way rejoicing.

And of these sweet and precious thoughts the first is this, that God is the source of our supplies. My God and your God will supply your need and mine. "God, even our own God, shall bless us."¹ He shall bless us from His own store-house in heaven. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning."² All our temporal and spiritual blessings—our daily bread and our daily grace, our raiment to put on, and the robe of Christ's righteousness to cover all our sins—are the gifts of God. They come from above. The Father of all sends them to us. It makes no matter who brings them nor how they come, they come from God. The rills and rivers of pleasure rise in His almighty love. "All my springs are in Thee."³

When Elijah was hiding by the brook Cherith the ravens came flying to him, twice a day, with his morning and evening meal; and after the brook failed, he was sent to Zarephath where a poor widow provided for his wants. But it was not so much the widow

¹ Ps. lxxvii. 6.² James i. 17.³ Ps. lxxvii. 7.

who provided for the prophet as the widow's God; it was not so much the ravens that "brought him bread and flesh" beside the brook as He who feeds the ravens when they cry. When he was sent to the brook, God said to him, "I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there."¹ And when he was sent to Zarephath, God said again, "I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee."²

At another time, when this same prophet was weary, and so cast down and discouraged that he wanted to die, he fell asleep under a juniper-tree, and as he slept an angel came down from heaven bringing with him "a cruse of water"; and folding up his shining wings, he kindled a fire with his own hands, and baked a cake "on the coals," and waked the wayfar-ing man, saying, "Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee. And he arose and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God."³

And although this lasting meal seems to have been specially provided and prepared for Elijah by his heavenly Father, who sent His angel on the errand, yet after all, it was no more from God, than when the widow baked the cake, or when the ravens brought it already baked.

If not in the same manner, still we receive all our supplies from the same source. Our common blessings, such as our food to eat, and our raiment to put on, are just as much from God as pardon of sin, and

¹ I Kings xvii. 4.

² I Kings xvii. 9.

³ I Kings xix. 7, 8.

the gift of the Holy Ghost. But then they are so common, and so constant, and keep coming with so much regularity,—year after year, and month after month, and week after week, and day after day, morning, noon, and night,—that while we receive the gifts we forget the giver. The ordinary supplies of Providence are regarded too much as a matter of course; and though we sing His praise “from whom all blessings flow,” His presence is quite overlooked, and we forget too frequently what a friend we have in heaven.

Let us see if it be not so? Suppose the home we left in coming here to-day had grown up around us suddenly, and in the night, like Jonah's gourd; that some kind, wondrous power had flung about us each domestic joy that now makes that happy home all the paradise we have on earth; that it had sent a low, sweet voice to call us husband, prattling voices to call us father, and a manly voice to call us friend; that every comfort that now sparkles in our daily life, like dewdrops upon flowers, had been like them the sudden creation of an hour. How strange, how wonderful, would it all appear! And yet that home, those voices, those daily comforts that we occupy, listen to, and enjoy, are not the less wonderful, and as it were miraculous, because they have risen up about us gradually and in the course of years. They are just as much the gift of God as if a legion of angels with visible hands had framed and built and planted them for us.

Suppose when you rise in the morning you should

find at your door a basket full of stores for the day's supply; and that you could be sure and certain that no human hand put it there; you would then have no difficulty in saying that God sent it. But because He sends it in a less direct manner, you do not recognize His providence in it. When you go away and plough the ground, and sow the seed, and reap the grain, and take it to the mill, and bring home the flour, and bake the bread, you do not see the hand of God in it as plain as in the basket at the door. But, yet, the good hand of God is in the one as much as in the other.

When the manna first fell in the wilderness it was a great wonder in the eyes of all the people; and the first morning that they gathered it up, "Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat."¹ But it rained down every day, except the Sabbath, and though it came from heaven every time, its coming was soon regarded as a matter of course, and it was contemplated rather as a natural event, like the showers that refresh the earth.

When the rock in Horeb was first smitten the "waters gushed out; they ran in dry places like a river,"² and the timely relief was looked upon as a special interposition of Providence. But that rock "followed them."³ Its sparkling stream attended all their winding way, and for eight and thirty years they had no lack of water. And what was the consequence? why, they became unmindful and unthankful. And so are we. Yet, strange to say, in all our

¹ Exod. xvi. 15.² Ps. cv. 41.³ I Cor. x. 4.

forgetfulness of God never doth He forget us. Of Him and through Him are all things that we enjoy; and "in Him we live, and move, and have our being, For we are all His offspring."¹

The certainty of our supplies is the next thought spoken of in the text: "My God shall supply your need." In the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, our heavenly Father has given unto us many "exceeding great and precious promises."² These promises relate to the body as well as the soul, to temporal as well as to spiritual things, to the beggarly elements of earth as well as to the glorious riches of heaven; "having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come."³ These promises are plain, positive, and sure. They are made to us by our heavenly Father; and, as if this were not security enough, they are confirmed "by an oath,"⁴ and endorsed by the prevailing name of Jesus; "For all the promises of God in Him are yea, and in Him Amen, unto the glory of God by us."⁵

As honest men we have much respect for the promises we make; and some people are so particular and prompt in the fulfilment of every engagement that their word is said to be as good as their bond. They will do as they have promised, Providence permitting. But however sure we may be that our promises to one another shall be kept, we are never quite sure. No matter how great our confidence may be in one another, it might be greater. Our word may be as

¹ Acts xvii. 28.

² II Pet. i. 4.

³ I Tim. iv. 8.

⁴ Heb. vi. 17.

⁵ II Cor. i. 20.

good as our bond, but circumstances may occur under which neither of them will be good for any thing. There are so many peradventures in the way, that we may not be able to keep the promises that we have made to others, and they may not be able to keep the promises they have made to us.

We need hardly tarry here to explain and illustrate this painful truth. Perhaps the last time we looked over our papers we saw a protest among them, or a note which was never paid, or a bill that never could be collected. And what are these but so many stinging evidences of the great uncertainty of human promises; which are broken oftener than they are kept? A hundred things may happen to hinder us from keeping our promises to one another. My health may fail; my wealth may fly away; and my friends may forsake me; or your business may take an unfavorable turn, your strong staff may be broken, and your dear husband may die. And when our supplies are so unexpectedly cut off how can we meet our engagements?

But, blessed be God, no contingency can break the covenant that He hath made with us. It is an "everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure."¹ It is surer than the rising and the setting sun, surer than the seed-time and the harvest, surer even than the heavens and the earth. Our God is a covenant keeper as well as a covenant maker. Have you not often seen His bow in the cloud, and have you not oftener read about it in the Bible? It is His own

¹ II Sam. xxiii. 5.

token of His own covenant that the world shall never be destroyed by another deluge. And no matter how hard the rain may descend, no matter how high the water may rise in the river, we never fear another flood. And reasoning from the less to the greater, shall God keep the covenant of the bow, and shall he not rather keep the better covenant of the cross, "which was established upon better promises?"¹ Shall He keep His covenant with this sinful world, which He has cursed with a curse? and shall He not rather keep His covenant with the saints for whom He shed His blood? Reasoning from the past to the present, shall God remember His promise to the patriarchs and prophets and apostles, and shall it be forgotten to us, His own blood-bought, baptized, and believing children? Hark! an answer from the skies is sent, "The mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee."²

Yes, the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed. In the consuming fires of the last day, they shall melt like wax, and even "the heavens shall pass away;"³ but the promises which God has made to His people shall never pass away: from the greatest to the least they shall be remembered and redeemed. If ordinary means will not be sufficient, miracles shall be wrought for their accomplishment. If need be, birds of prey shall forget their nature and bring them bread beside the brook; or an angel shall come down from

¹ Heb. viii. 6.² Isa. liv. 10.³ II Pet. iii. 10.

heaven and bake them cakes. Iron shall "swim"¹ for them that the "borrowed" axe may be restored; and if the day be not long enough for them to win the victory, the sun and moon shall stand "still in the midst of heaven,"² till they are more than conquerors.

The extent of our supplies is another thought contained in the text, "My God shall supply all your need." The supply as you will notice now is exceeding great. We have a rich Father in heaven, and there is not a temporal, or spiritual want, for which He has not made the most abundant provision. The fountain of His love is always full and overflowing, and always flowing down to us; and when we need it most it flows all the faster, like "streams from Lebanon."³ "For the Lord God is a sun and shield: the Lord will give grace and glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly."⁴ "And God is able to make all grace abound towards you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work."⁵ Right well we love and prize these promises, because they are so comprehensive, like the one now passing under review, "My God shall supply all your need." Not some of your need, but all of it. Do you need your daily bread? "Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed."⁶ Do you need money to pay your tax? You shall surely have it. You may not know where it will come from, but it will come from somewhere.

¹ II Kings vi. 6.

² Josh. x. 13.

³ Cant. iv. 15.

⁴ Ps. lxxxiv. 11.

⁵ II Cor. ix. 8.

⁶ Ps. xxxvii. 3.

The barrel of meal may be quite empty, you may not have the widow's handful there; the cruse of oil may fail; and sorer still, there may be no money in the house: days ago the last penny was spent for meat or medicine; but remember and forget it not,

"Ravens once did cater to Elijah's need;
And a fish for Peter tribute money paid."

And, if there was no other way to supply your table and your purse with the bread and the money that you need, I believe that the birds of the air and the fish of the sea would be God's angels again and bring them to you.

But then, only your need will be supplied, according to the promise. We all wish for many things that we do not want; and many things that are desirable for us we utterly despise. As for example we would like to be rich, and have money enough and to spare; but we do not need wealth, and it might be a great curse to us: "For there be as many miseries beyond riches as on this side of them." And we would like to have unbroken health; but we may need sickness rather. "Before I was afflicted I went astray."¹ The apostle Paul did not like the thorn in the flesh. It tormented him so much, he prayed that it might be taken away; but he needed it in order to keep down his spiritual pride. And when he found out how much he needed it, and received the grace to balance and to bear it, then he gloried in it. "All these things are against me,"² their father Jacob said,

¹ Ps. cxix. 67.

² Gen. xlii. 36.

when as he supposed Joseph was not, and Simeon was not, and his brethren were desiring to take Benjamin away. And yet, as we all know, this was the rough but right way in which a wise and kind Providence was taking to provide better things for the patriarch and his family.

And as for ourselves, dearly beloved, let us always remember that God has never promised to supply our wishes; but only our wants, and these only as they arise from day to day. Many good people are prone to borrow trouble on interest, if I may speak so. The poor widow looks upon her little children, and there is something like a tear standing in her eye, and her pale lips begin to quiver as she says, so sorrowfully, "How shall I provide for them now when their father is gone to the grave?" And the Christian who desponds is always fearing the troubles that are coming in the future, and in downright despair he cries out, "How shall I ever be able to meet them? Oh that I had grace enough to bear me safely through them all!

Now, we might answer these groundless forebodings in the language of the common people, "Don't cross the bridge till you come to it;" but we prefer to answer them in the better language of the Bible, "Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be."¹ Not as thy years, nor as thy months, nor as thy weeks; but, "as thy days, so shall thy strength be." To-morrow you may come to a rougher road, but you shall have better shoes. To-morrow you may have a heavier burden to carry, but

¹ Deut. xxxiii. 25.

you shall have greater strength. You may come to your Gethsemane to-morrow, but the Gethsemane angel shall be there beforehand, to lift you up in his kind arms and give you sweet comfort. You will need your daily bread to-morrow, and your daily grace, and, blessed be God, you shall have them both: "And to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant."¹

The measure of our supplies is another precious thought in the text: "According to His riches in glory my God shall supply all your need." The Lord is rich in every thing. The gold and silver are His, for He made them in the mines; and the cattle on a thousand hills are all the Lord's. The world itself, and all the worlds, with all their wealth, belong to God. He is the Creator and Proprietor of all things that are in heaven above and in the earth beneath. We call men rich, when they have more than enough to satisfy their own wants; and we call them very rich, if they have such an abundance of the good things of this world that they can satisfy the wants of many; and it is a goodly sight to see men of great wealth blessing the poor with their bounty.

But the riches of all the rich men in the world are as nothing, when compared with the riches of the Almighty. Besides, the little wealth that men may get is never abiding. Some of our coins are called eagles, and are stamped with the image of an eagle, the wings of which are not folded, as if to rest awhile, but outstretched, as if always ready to fly

¹ Isa. lvi. 12.

away. Now this is an excellent device, and, although not so intended, it is a good commentary on that faithful saying, "Riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven."¹

We have known persons who were once rich, but they became poor. The wheel of fortune took an unexpected turn, and in a moment the earnings of a long life were lost. And we have read of a rich man in Europe whose income was a hundred thousand pounds a year; but he lived so fast that he soon spent the principal as well as the interest; and the gates of his golden mansion, which had refused admittance to a monarch, were thrust open by the sheriff and sold to the highest bidder. His great fortune was quite exhausted.

But God's glorious riches are "enduring,"² and inexhaustible. Giving doth not impoverish God, it seems rather to enrich Him. He has been giving since the beginning, but He has just as much to give as He had in the beginning. His sun shines just as bright for us as it did for our first parents in Paradise. His store-house is just as full as it ever was; and although the earth is daily burdened with benefits poured from the horn of His plenty there is always more to follow. The blessings of His Providence and His grace seem to grow, like the little barley loaves passing through the Saviour's wonder-working hands; and when the feast is over, and the last man is filled, there will be fragments enough left for twelve more worlds like the one in which our lot is cast.

¹ Prov. xxiii. 5.

² Heb. x. 34.

Great mountains have been exhausted of their gold, and seas of their pearls; but God's riches in grace and glory are more plenty, as well as more precious, than gold and pearls. Pardon of sin, and peace of mind, and purity of heart, and faith, and repentance, and hope, and love, and life, and health, and food, and raiment, and heaven.—But what am I doing? I find myself striving to reckon up God's riches in glory; but I forbear. I can not take that inventory. I have seen many things, and heard many things, and thought many things; my eyes have been feasted, and my ears have been ravished, and my mind has soared away on the wings of the imagination, till I was weary with seeing and hearing and thinking; but "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him."¹ And looking at the open hand of our heavenly Father we can not help saying, with the Psalmist, "Oh how great is thy goodness, which thou hast laid up for them that fear thee; which thou hast wrought for them that trust in thee before the sons of men."²

The channel through which our supplies come to us is the last thought in the text, and the last shall be first, "By Christ Jesus, my God shall supply all your need." We had no right to any of our temporal blessings after the covenant of works was broken; we had no right to any of our spiritual blessings; nay, more, we had no right to any thing, not even to life itself. But Jesus became our security, promising to

¹ I Cor. ii. 9.

² Ps. *xxxi.* 19.

take our place, to pay our debt, and to suffer our punishment; and in the fulness of time He came into the world in "the form of a servant,"¹ to execute the covenant which He made with the Father, in our behalf before the world began; and by obeying the law and suffering its penalty for us, in the form of a sinner, He redeemed us from its curse, and purchased for us more blessings than were lost: "But not as the offence, so also is the free gift: for if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many."² "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich."³ There is not a solitary blessing that we enjoy, or that we ever will enjoy, that Jesus did not purchase for us with His own most precious blood. Our common blessings, as we call them often, are all covenant blessings. The week's wages, which we received last night, were the wages of Gethsemane and Calvary. Yes, that very money, for which we sweat only drops of toil, Jesus sweat "great drops of blood falling down to the ground."⁴

In thinking so much, as we do, about the greater benefits of our Redeemer's death, we are prone to forget the lesser. He died for our sins, most true; but He died for our sorrows as well: "Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows."⁵ The beg-

¹ Phil. ii. 7.

² Rom. v. 15.

³ II Cor. viii. 9.

⁴ Luke xxii. 44.

⁵ Isa. liii. 4.

gar's crust of bread was purchased on the cross, as well as his crown of glory; his cup of cold water only, as well as his harp of gold. And your morning meal, which you received, perhaps, without thanksgiving, was just as much provided for you by Christ, as the bread of life. The raiment that you now wear was woven for you on the cross, as well as the robe of righteousness. Yes, Jesus hungered and thirsted that your bread and water might be sure. He had not where to lay His head that you might have your home with all its comforts. He was stripped of His coat that you might have one to put on. He was friendless that you might have friends. And last of all, He gave His life a ransom for your life. And not only so, but having purchased, at such a cost, these blessings of grace and glory for you, He brings them to you and begs your acceptance of them, saying, "I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed."¹

How much, how very much, we ought to love our dear Lord Jesus! Ought to love Jesus did I say? Let me look at that winter-like word for a moment, that I may measure its meaning? At the first glance the lump of ice begins to melt into a river of pleasure. Did Mary the mother of Jesus feel that she ought to love Joseph her espoused husband? Was Rachel obliged to love Jacob? and was it Sarah's duty to love Abraham? Oh no! these honorable women loved their husbands because they could not help it.

¹ Rev. iii. 18.

Even so I love my Saviour. Long ago I yielded to His divine wooing. He has betrothed me to Himself; I am His royal bride, and He is my royal Bridegroom: "My Beloved is mine and I am His."¹ He has gone away to prepare for me, the marriage mansion and the marriage supper. Meanwhile He comes to see me, and before the celestial beauty of His fascinating and triumphant charms, every thought of obligation vanishes away, and I count it my highest joy to cast myself into His kind arms, that I may repose there forever on the bosom of His infinite, eternal, and unchangeable affection. His love to me is the mother of my love to Him: "We love Him, because He first loved us."² Moreover His love to me should be the measure of my love to Him. He loved me so much that He died for me: "Who loved me, and gave Himself for me;"³ and I ought to be willing to die for Him.

I love Him for what He is, as well as for what He has done for me. Am I poor? Jesus is the riches of my poverty. Am I sick? Jesus is the health of my sickness. Am I rich? Jesus is more than my great possessions. Every thing without Jesus is nothing, and nothing but Jesus is Jesus and every thing. He is better than the best of all my friends; "The chiefest among ten thousand;"⁴ and lovelier than the loveliest; "Yea, He is altogether lovely." Superseding all when all remains, He is a substitute for all when all is gone: all in all, and all without

¹ Cant. ii. 16.

² I John iv. 19.

³ Gal. ii. 20.

⁴ Cant. v. 10.

all. "As the apple-tree among the trees of the wood, so is my Beloved among the sons. I sat down under His shadow with great delight, and His fruit was sweet to my taste."¹

Jesus is more and better and dearer than all the world to me; He is more and better and dearer to me than all the world to come; He is the heaven of my heart, and the heart of my heaven: "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee."² "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour."³ "I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love till He please."⁴

"O light in darkness, joy in grief,
O heaven begun on earth!
Jesus, my love, my treasure, who
Can tell what Thou art worth?"

¹ Cant. ii. 3.

² Ps. lxxiii. 25.

³ Luke i. 46.

⁴ Cant. ii. 7.

O LORD, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise. Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray and cry aloud. Remove far from me vanity and lies; feed me with food convenient for me; lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord? Or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain. Give me a blessing; for thou hast given me a south land; give me also

springs of water, the upper springs, and the nether springs. Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O Lord. How precious, also, are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand: when I awake, I am still with thee. I will go in the strength of the Lord God: I will make mention of thy righteousness, even of thine only. O God, thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works. Now, also, when I am old and gray headed, O God, forsake me not; until I have showed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to every one that is to come. Thou, which hast showed me great and sore troubles, shalt quicken me again, and shalt bring me up again from the depths of the earth. Thou shalt increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side. I will also praise thee with the psaltery, even thy truth, O my God: unto thee will I sing with the harp, O thou Holy One of Israel. My lips shall greatly rejoice when I sing unto thee; and my soul which thou hast redeemed. My tongue also shall talk of thy righteousness all the day long: for they are confounded, for they are brought unto shame, that seek my hurt. My soul shall make her boast in the Lord; the humble shall hear thereof and be glad. My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord: and let all flesh bless His holy name forever and ever.

THE SONG OF SORROWS.



CHAPTER VII.

"Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation."—HAB. iii. 17, 18.

THE drought in summer is a very dreadful thing. For several weeks, perhaps for months, there has been no rain from heaven, nor any dew, to refresh the thirsty earth, and every green thing is blighted. And if dry weather continues all the year round, the twelve months seem like a funeral procession following the dead world to its burial. And should there be no "showers of blessing"¹ for several years in succession, no speech nor language could describe the consuming curse. The flowers fade away, the springs and wells and water-brooks are all dried up; and here and there the ground itself is split asunder, as if to show that the very heart of the world is broken by the greatness of its grief, and "the whole creation groaneth."²

The sky is sometimes overcast, which seems a token for good, but the next moment the clouds are flying away, as if they had come only to mock and make sport of the distress which is overwhelming the earth

¹ Ezek. xxxiv. 26.

² Rom. viii. 22.

and they that dwell therein. From the murky appearance of the landscape, you would judge that every hill and mountain must be a burning volcano; and by breathing the stifling atmosphere, you would almost think that the bottomless pit was opened to mingle its tormenting smoke with the suffocating sunbeams.

And, while the blight continues, it never ceases to turn beauty into deformity, health into sickness, and life into death; every bright spot of ground is blasted into a blackened wilderness, and every garden enclosed seems like a section of Sahara. The neighboring lake, once so beautiful that it seemed like the smile of the Great Spirit, has become a dead sea; and the noble river is nothing now but a number of stagnant pools, which breathe out their pestilential odors to poison the air, while every living thing is either dead or dying: "The seed is rotten under their clods, the garners are laid desolate, the barns are broken down; for the corn is withered. How do the beasts groan! the herds of cattle are perplexed, because they have no pasture; yea, the flocks of sheep are made desolate."¹

Such is the doleful picture presented to us in the text. A great calamity was coming on "the Holy Land."² Its gloomy sky looked strangely forgetful of the early and the latter rain, and seemed to be hardening into iron and brass; and beneath a scorching sun the earth was fast turning into powder and dust. The days and nights and weeks and months were only dismal, and that continually. Dark discomfort

¹ Joel i. 17, 18.

² Zech. ii. 12.

brooded over every thing; and to the prophet's eye Palestine presented a sadder sight than winter. The leaves of the trees were curling and crumbling away, and the trees themselves were dying slowly; and sweet and happy Canaan was looking lonely, desolate, and sad.

By all accounts, the land of promise was a land of plenty. With the exception of Eden, it was doubtless the most fertile corner of the world: "A good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig-trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey."¹ When the spies were searching the country, they came to the brook Eschol, "and cut down from thence a branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bare it between two upon a staff."² How large and heavy that cluster must have been! and what a good idea it gives us of the wonderful fertility of the soil! And besides the fields, the flocks and herds of the Holy Land are often spoken of as bringing forth plentifully.

All these things, pertaining to the prosperity of a people, were not only found in Canaan, but they abounded there. They abounded there by the blessing of God, who sent His rain to soften the soil and crown it with glory.

But by reason of the sins of the children of Israel the natural productions of their covenanted country are represented in the text as failing and spreading a sore famine throughout the land. "Her Nazarites

¹ Deut. viii. 7, 8.

² Num. xiii. 23.

were purer than snow, they were whiter than milk, they were more ruddy in body than rubies, their polishing was of sapphire; their visage is blacker than a coal; they are not known in the streets: their skin cleaveth to their bones: it is withered, it is become like a stick."¹ And sorer still, thousands of the people are perishing with hunger and thirst. In every city, and in almost every house, there is weeping and wailing, and whole families are cut off; even large villages are left without one living inhabitant.

But the most surprising thing of all the rest is this, that the holy man of God, who saw and sketched this deplorable picture, himself rejoices in the Lord, giving glory to the God of his salvation. Looking around on the mournful scene, no tear starts from his eye; listening to the cry of anguish everywhere, no sigh rises from his heart; but contrariwise, a song of loudest praise bursts forth from his joyful lips, and these are the brave, beautiful, and blessed words to which his tongue is tuned: "Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation."²

This inspired song of sorrows was not the peculiar, personal property of the prophet, through whose lips it came, like a charming cadence, from beyond the sky. It is given to all the suffering people of God

¹ *Lam.* iv. 7, 8.

² *Hab.* iii. 17, 18.

in every age and in every land; and no language, with which we are acquainted, can so well express the triumphant joy which the Christian may experience in the time of trouble. The fruitful field of the heart is often turned into a barren waste, by the distressing dispensations of Providence, and there is a sore famine in the soul. The brightest human hopes are sometimes blasted when they are in full blossom; and the longest cherished and fondest expectations are often altogether vanity.

Taking up this theme, which accompanies and flows from the text, we will strive to engage your attention with some of those afflictions, which are sent upon us here, causing us more sorrow than that which comes when the fig-tree does not blossom, and there is no fruit in the vines; when the labor of the olive fails, and the fields yield no meat; when the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls.

And, that there may be some method in our meditation, when entering on this subject we will remark, that our brightest hopes are sometimes blasted. This is so self-evident that we need not tarry long thinking to make it more manifest. It so coincides with the experience of mankind, that we have only to appeal to your own hearts, and immediately there is an amen, and an argument for this faithful and true saying, that human expectations are "Vanity of vanities."¹

When the aged men, of the generation that is passing away, were young, they formed their plans and

¹ Eccl. i. 1.

purposes, and marked out the path in which they would walk. In their own minds they determined what would be their future course; they decided where and how they would live, and what would be their business. And now, after so long a time, if they would give expression to their experience, it would begin with some such words as these, "We were disappointed in our expectations;" and after this manner it would end, "All our hopes were blasted."

These did not realize the fairy-like visions of the future on which they used to pour forth all the poetry of their souls. Their plans failed, their purposes were broken off, and their path was changed. In the bright morning of life, their eyes were mercifully closed concerning their destiny. They were like blind men, and the Lord brought them "by a way that they knew not."¹ They came to hills of difficulty which they could not climb over; and their own chosen ways were so hedged about, that they were often compelled to change their course, as the sea-faring men are sometimes obliged to do, to save themselves from shipwreck: "A man's heart deviseth his way: but the Lord directeth his steps."²

Many years ago, in the little town of Bethlehem, there dwelt a happy family consisting of a husband and his wife and their two children. Then, as now, it was a religious duty to labor for the necessities and the comforts of life; and with the purest motives this pious family "went to sojourn in the country of

¹ Isa. xlii. 16.

² Prov. xvi. 9.

Moab.”¹ And there were doubtless many good reasons for their going away, beside the famine that had blasted and blackened their beautiful land. They expected to get relief from present embarrassment, and better their circumstances. But they went from bad to worse, and all of them, but one, went to their graves. And after ten years of tribulation and anguish, the widowed, childless mother returned, saying, “I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty.”²

These people, it is true, did not belong to the nobility, nor were they blessed with wealth; they were only a poor family. But the richest, oldest, and most honorable families of earth are not exempt from the vicissitudes of fortune. Even royal families are not always prosperous. David had riches and honor in abundance. He resided in a splendid mansion, and swayed the heaviest sceptre that any monarch ever lifted, for he was king in Jerusalem. Besides, he was greatly beloved of God, “a man after His own heart.”³ But there came a dark day during his reign, when he was driven from his dominion, and for some time he was supported by the charity of his heathen neighbors, who felt pity for him, and “Brought beds, and basins, and earthen vessels, and wheat, and barley, and flour, and parched corn, and beans, and lentils, and parched pulse, and honey, and butter, and sheep, and cheese of kine, for David, and for the people that were with him to eat: for they said, The people is hungry, and weary, and thirsty in the wilder-

¹ Ruth i. 1.² Ruth i. 21.³ I Sam. xiii. 14.

ness."¹ And in our own day we have seen the richest ruler in the world disguised in the livery of a servant flying for his life, and dying in a strange land, an alien and almost a beggar. All history, ancient and modern, sacred and profane, is a sorry commentary on the vanity of human hopes.

Those of us who have lived long enough to see the variety and to feel the vicissitudes of life, need no evidence to prove our personal knowledge. But there are many, in the morning of life, who are about to spread the sail, and put out to sea in a cruise after happiness. And you may depend upon it, you will be disappointed every way. The water will be rough sometimes, the sky will be dark, and the heaviest anchors will not be able to hold your ship, when she shall be driven before the wind, and "exceedingly tossed with a tempest."² And sorer still, you will never find the object of your search. "The depth saith, It is not in me: and the sea saith, It is not with me."³ Some of your calculations may even now be reaching far into the future; but you better have a care, and preface every plan, "By the will of God." "Boast not thyself of to-morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth."⁴ "Go to now, ye that say, To-day or to-morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow."⁵ You may be intending to give an entertainment to your friends. The time may be appointed

¹ II Sam. xvii. 28, 29.

² Acts xxvii. 18.

³ Job xxviii. 14.

⁴ Prov. xxvii. 1.

⁵ James iv. 13.

for the banquet, the invitations may be issued, and music may be engaged. But the day for the banquet may prove the day for the burial; and instead of receiving your guests so joyfully as you expected, they may gather sadly around your coffin and carry you to the tomb; and perhaps some of them may learn that, "It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting."¹

It should however be observed, that, as a general rule, human hopes are not all blasted at the same time. It is very seldom that we see a person who is a stranger to all joy and always. One whose head is waters; whose eyes are a fountain of tears; and whose heart is girdled with grief. In the natural world it is not often that there comes a general famine. We have never seen a total failure of all the crops, all over the country, during the same season. One kind of grain may prove not worth the reaping, but of another sort there may be a plentiful harvest. The products of the early spring may be destroyed by an untimely frost, but the summer's planting may escape the blight. If the fig-tree shall not blossom, there may be fruit in the vines; and if the labor of the olive fail, the fields might yield their meat; and though the flock be cut off from the fold, still a small herd may be left in the stalls. The total failure of all these good gifts to the husbandman, is a calamity which comes only once in many years.

And, as a general thing, grief comes gradually,

¹ Eccl. vii. 2.

little by little. The burden is wisely suited to the pilgrim's bending back; and if it should seem too much for him, the Saviour, his companion in tribulation, puts His own shoulder to its support. Jesus tempers every trial: "He stayeth His rough wind in the day of the east wind;"¹ and will never permit His blood-bought people to be "swallowed up with overmuch sorrow."² He has made too many promises to them, loves them too well, has laid out too much for them, and is too much interested in their welfare, to allow them to be crushed to death, by the burdens which they can not carry: "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."³

Sickness comes upon the saint; his health is so badly broken that he can never expect to be the same active man again; and immediately the blight begins to appear, and the fig-tree does not blossom. Then adversity follows, nor is it any wonder. He can not meet his engagements, and not being able to superintend his own affairs, he becomes embarrassed in business, and there is no fruit in the vines. At last death comes suddenly into his family, and the desire of his eyes is taken away with a stroke. The twain whom God joined together are put asunder, and the labor of the olive fails.

Now so much of a famine of the good things of this life some of you may have experienced already. And if you have not, you must have seen many of

¹ Isa. xxvii. 8.

² II Cor. ii. 7.

³ I Cor. x. 13.

your friends and neighbors suffering by reason of it. And if so much sorrow be sufficient for the Christian's proving and purifying, he is afflicted no more. But if it be not sufficient, he must continue to hear the rod which speaks as well as smites. And in all our afflictions it is beautiful and good to notice the gentleness and tenderness and mother-like manner in which they are administered. We wander from the way of holiness and sin against heaven. We forget that we are betrothed unto the Lord forever, and forsake our first love; and immediately He begins to plead with us. He speaks kindly, in "a still small voice,"¹ and utters only comfortable words: "Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am married unto you."² But if there be no repentance on our part, nor works meet for repentance, He keeps on speaking, and smiting too, if it must be so, until He is both heard and heeded. He says, "I will curse your blessings;"³ and in the departure of those things that we love, and in the coming of those things that we dread, we hear His voice and feel His hand. Our own chosen way is hedged up with thorns, so that we can not get out to follow after other lovers. Our corn is taken away in the time thereof, and our wine in the season thereof, till we are constrained to say, "I will go and return to my first husband; for then it was better with me than now."⁴

By the Jews the leprosy was called "the finger of God," and emphatically, the stroke. They said that

¹ I Kings xix. 12.

² Jer. iii. 14.

³ Mal. ii. 2.

⁴ Hos. ii. 7.

it attacked first a man's house, and if he did not turn, his clothing; and then if he continued in sin, himself. And whether the fact was so or not, this is a fine illustration of the manner in which God's judgments, if men refuse to listen to them, reach nearer and nearer to the centre of their life. Our heavenly Father is so full of tender compassion that He can not smite us as we deserve. His loving heart holds back His lifted hand. Blessed be His glorious name forever, "He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities;"¹ "Yea, many a time turned He His anger away, and did not stir up all His wrath."²

But if the milder measures of His loving-kindness prove ineffectual, if the partial famine of our comforts bring us not back to the feet of Jesus, in penitence and prayer, there will follow blight after blight, and blow after blow, till there comes a total failure of every blessing. Of the Lord's own covenant people it was said, "When He slew them, then they sought Him: and they returned and inquired early after God. And they remembered that God was their Rock and the high God their Redeemer."³

And so it comes to pass, that all our hopes are sometimes blasted all at once. Every blessing is cursed, every friend is taken away, and cross after cross is laid on the weary shoulder. Such cases may be of rare occurrence; nevertheless we can not close our eyes to the fact, that some people have been marked by sorrow as peculiarly her own. Perhaps,

¹ Ps. ciii. 10.

² Ps. lxxviii. 38.

³ Ps. lxxviii. 34, 35.

even now, within the circle of your acquaintances, you may be able to remember some on whose brow sadness ever sits enthroned; some in whose sky not one star is ever seen to shine, and in whose blighted heart no blessed hope of better days is dawning. They were born to trouble, and to nothing else. Beneath the cloud they go always, and are never once seen beyond the valley of the shadow of death. When the morning comes, they say, "Would God it were even!"¹ and at even they say, "Would God it were morning!" All time is a time of trouble, and it hangs heavily upon them. It can hardly be said that they have any days; because the rising of the sun is like the going down of the same, and it is night all the time where they sojourn. And they have their "songs in the night";² but these are all sorrowful, and are set to some mournful tune and sound, like the sighing of the stormy wind, or the moaning of the melancholy sea. Passing through the valley of Baca, they can dig no wells for their refreshment. You never see them smiling and happy; but, on the contrary, they are as solemn and as gloomy as the grave. And why are they so sorrowful? Why, just because there is to them such a total failure of all their temporal blessings. In their painful experience the fig-tree does not blossom, and there is no fruit in the vines; the labor of the olive fails, and the fields yield no meat; the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls. Every hope is blasted; every comfort is clean gone; every shadowing gourd

¹ Deut. xxviii. 67.² Job xxxv. 10.

is withered; and every well-spring of pleasure is dried up. They have no heart for any thing any more, except to brood over its own bitterness. In their personal history they find ample proof of the proverb, that one sorrow seldom comes alone, and when it does it is sometimes the forerunner of a troop. "That which the palmerworm hath left hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left hath the cankerworm eaten; and that which the cankerworm hath left hath the caterpillar eaten."¹

Without controversy, such was the case of the upright man of the land of Uz. The patriarch Job was blessed so abundantly that the horn of heaven's plenty seemed to be emptied in his lap. Ten olive plants were growing up round about his table,— "Seven sons and three daughters,"—and in his constantly increasing wealth he had enough and to spare; besides, he was "the greatest of all the men of the east."² But yet, in one short day, adversity, affliction, and bereavement came. It was not in the same year, nor in the same month, nor in the same week, but it was in the same day; and doubtless it was in the same hour that his sore troubles lighted round him like birds of prey: "Wheresoever the body is, thither will the eagles be gathered together."³ And herein consists the overwhelming severity of his sorrows, they came so close together, like wave succeeding wave. Before he had time to recover from the first calamity, the second came; and then the third; and still another, heavier and harder to be

¹ Joel i. 4.² Job i. 3.³ Luke xvii. 37.

borne than all the rest. Let us listen to the woe-ful story. "There was a day when his sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: and there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were ploughing, and the asses feeding beside them: and the Sabeans fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: and, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee."¹

When such sorrows are sent upon us, we should rejoice because they come at the command of God. Seasons of famine are just as much from Him as fruitful seasons; the "black horses" of adversity are sent out by Him, as well as the "white horses"² of

¹ Job i. 13-19.² Zech. vi. 2, 3.

prosperity. We must look above and beyond the second and apparent causes to God,—the First, the Last, and only efficient Cause,—the Cause of causes, “Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of His hand.”¹ The waters that are above the firmament He holds in one hand, and the waters that are under the firmament He holds in the other hand. And with His hands, as with a pair of balances, “He weigheth the waters,”² and poureth them from one to the other by measure, and according to His good pleasure: “He causeth the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; He maketh lightnings for the rain; He bringeth the wind out of His treasures.”³

And as the Lord reigneth in the kingdom of nature,—making the day and the night, the summer and the winter; so He reigneth in the kingdom of providence,—ordaining, ordering, and overruling all things. Therefore, in all time of our trial, and in all time of our tribulation, the lofty language of the latter part of the text ought to dwell upon our tongues. Great grief may be indulged by the heathen in their blindness, and by all those who do not know that the earth has a heavenly Ruler; but it is positively sinful for the Christian to abandon his heart to excessive sorrow, and go mourning all his days.

Public affairs may take a sombre turn, and party spirit may rise to such a pitch of passion as to threaten the overthrow of the government under which we live; and the hearts of our wisest statesmen may be failing them for fear of the fearful things

¹ Isa. xl. 12.

² Job xxviii. 25.

³ Ps. cxxxv. 7.

that seem to be coming in the near future. Moreover, the times may be hard; every branch of business may be perfectly prostrated, and tens of thousands of people, who were once in easy circumstances, may be sitting in sackcloth and ashes, saying, "What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?"¹

But the Lord reigneth, and the helm of our national affairs is held in His hand. "The Lord hath prepared His throne in the heavens, and His kingdom ruleth over all."² "He changeth the times and the seasons: He removeth kings and setteth up kings."³ He may not be heard in the councils and cabinets of presidents and princes, nevertheless He is always present presiding over all their deliberations, and ruling or overruling all their acts, for the promotion of His own plans. He never interferes with the freedom of their will, they do just as they please, and at the same time they do all His pleasure. His name may be carefully excluded from their constitutions, as it is from our own; and in the administration of affairs His authority may be quite overlooked; but though the government be infidel or atheistic, it is on His shoulder. The most special efforts may be made to resist His influence, and to thwart His purposes, but they shall utterly fail: "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against His Anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us. He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the

¹ Mat. vi. 31. ² Ps. ciii. 19. ³ Dan. ii. 21.

Lord shall have them in derision."¹ The kings and queens of the earth, whether they are good or bad, are all His ministers. Their hearts are in His hand, and "He turneth them whithersoever He will."² The crown is not on Cæsar's head, but on Christ's, "Who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords."³

And the hard times come from heaven. After a season of prosperity we should expect a season of adversity, because "God also hath set the one over against the other."⁴ When David said to God, "My times are in thy hand,"⁵ he did not mean his good times merely, but his bad times as well, if, indeed, he did not mean these last altogether. The years of poverty are just as much from God as the years of plenty. The seven lean kine and the seven fat kine came up out of the same river. And when we are crushed in spirit and our substance is consumed away, it is the Lord's doing, and the Lord's people ought to be as ready to recognize this truth as the heathen magicians in Egypt, who were constrained to say, concerning one of the plagues, "This is the finger of God."⁶

The Lord reigneth! What a soul-filling and refreshing thought this is in troublous times, like the present, when the whole world is agitated, alarmed, and apprehensive of evil. Almost every year there is a congress of kings, and the oldest empires of the earth are depending for their existence on the skill

¹ Ps. ii. 2-4.² Prov. xxi. 1.³ 1 Tim. vi. 15.⁴ Eccl. vii. 14.⁵ Ps. xxxi. 15.⁶ Exod. viii. 19.

of diplomacy or the strength of arms. But when Christ says, "The time is come," the greatest dominion must pass away and perish. It is the pierced hand that sways the universal sceptre. It is the thorn-torn, bleeding brow, that wears the "many crowns."¹ It is the One who was hanged upon a tree, who has become the Prince of the kings of the earth, and "He must reign, till He hath put all enemies under His feet."²

When we hear about wars and rumors of wars; when we see crowned heads taking counsel together so often; when we know that great armies are mustering and marching to "Armageddon,"³—some may find the cause of all these troubles in malice, or mad ambition, or "the balance of power"; but we can not stop short of the First and Last and only true Cause. It is our joy to know that all these things are nothing else than the Man with the bruised heel going through the earth casting down one, and setting up another, and so preparing the way for all the nations to come and crown Him Lord of all.

The Lord reigneth! How sweetly comforting is this to the Christian in times of personal trial. Perhaps some of you are passing through the waters now, sinking down in the dark depths of sorrow and of suffering. You are greatly embarrassed in your business, and all your friends have failed to help you. Your creditors are getting uneasy; some of them have seized your property, and there is the sheriff's notice of sale nailed upon the door of your dwelling. And,

¹ Rev. xix. 12.² I Cor. xv. 25.³ Rev. xvi. 16.

sorer still, it is whispered about that you are not as honest as you ought to be, and your health begins to break. Here and there may be found a man who ascribes such sad changes as these to chance. Chance what? chance who? chance where? "It is the Lord: let Him do what seemeth Him good."¹ "What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?"²

Rising a little higher in God's own chosen way of holiness, we should rejoice in our sorrows because they are sent upon us in loving-kindness. When His covenant people were entering into their covenanted country, the Lord said to them, "It shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, that I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil. And I will send grass in thy fields for thy cattle, that thou mayest eat and be full. Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other Gods, and worship them; and then the Lord's wrath be kindled against you, and He shut up the heaven, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit; and lest ye perish quickly from off the good land which the Lord giveth you."³ In these words there is a precious promise, and a terrible threatening; but each had the same blessed end in

¹ I Sam. iii. 18.² Job ii. 10.³ Deut. xi. 13-17.

view, and both of them proceeded from the lips of the same Lord, whose wrath is only another name for His love: "For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth."¹

In time of trouble, it would be good to have a friend at court, who could speak to the king in our behalf; but it would be better to have a father on the throne to whom we could go ourselves. Then we might reasonably expect much care, and many royal favors. And this is our case exactly. The Father of the rain and the dew is our Father, and having the heart of a father, He loves us dearly, and has a tenderer watch and care over us than the kindest earthly parent. The divinest mother's love is only the dim shadow of His better and more abiding affection; and the fondest father in the world must be counted a stranger in comparison of Him. He is a Father who has the measurement of our strength: "He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust";² and He is so considerate that He will never permit us to be burdened above what we are able to bear. And when we look at our afflictions in the light of His loving-kindness, every difficulty is solved, every cloud is brightened, and every sorrow is sweetened. A Father's love—our Father's love—is the mainspring of every mournful event, and the cause of every calamity: "For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth."³

And this, after all, is the only way in which we can account for the perplexing dispensations of Prov-

¹ Prov. iii. 12.

² Ps. ciii. 14.

³ Heb. xii. 6.

idence. Reason can not explain the reason of the rod; passing through this Baca of breaking and of bleeding hearts, it is at best but a blind leader of the blind, and there is danger that both may fall into the ditch. The greatest modern philosopher, whose mind is stored with all the wisdom of the world, can not master the mystery of affliction. "Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep."¹

And no other perfection of "The everlasting Father,"² except His love, can solve the problem of our sorrows. At present, we may not be able to understand it perfectly: "For now we see through a glass darkly;"³ but in a little while it will be made quite plain. A Father's love sends every storm on the water, gathers every cloud in the sky, and plants every thorn in our path; it is the pruning-hook that sunders every tie, the hammer that nails every coffin, and the spade that digs every grave. Yes, it is our Father's love that gathers the lilies from our garden, leaving the home so desolate, and the heart so full of anguish. "Even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight."⁴

And if any of you are asking why our heavenly Father resorts to such severity sometimes, I will tell you. It is because He hates sin with such a perfect hatred, and loves His children with such a perfect love. He finds the elements of evil bound up in their hearts, and He will not suffer these to remain there to work their ruin. And the very fact that He cor-

¹ John iv. 11.

² Isa. ix. 6.

³ I Cor. xiii. 12.

⁴ Mat. xi. 26.

rects them is the best evidence that He has the kindest feelings for them. It is to make your children more obedient, and better every way, that you are often obliged to use the rod; you love them too well, and are too anxious for their future welfare, to permit them to grow up in the way that they would go if they were left unrestrained and uncorrected.

And it is when they do wrong, and because they do wrong, that our heavenly Father chasteneth His sons and daughters; and it is not against them, but against their sins, that every blow is aimed. If the precious metals came pure from the mines, there would be no need of the furnace; there would be no need of the fire. It is their dross and tin that renders their refining necessary. And it is of a set purpose to burn out of His dear children the dross of carnality that God the Father, and their Father, puts them in the fining pot and kindles the fire. Love is the fuel that feeds and fans the flame; the flame itself is love—every spark is love. The painful process is begun and continued and ended in love: "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten."¹

Let us then keep in mind that our sorrows are sent upon us in loving-kindness, and never forget that they are intended for good. God's loving-kindness has this end in view, and works only this result. The long-continued famine that came in the time of Jacob, and threatened the destruction of his family, was a great blessing to himself, to all his posterity, and to the whole world as well. It led to the dis-

¹ Rev. iii. 19.

covery of his long-lost and lamented Joseph; it constrained him to go down into Egypt to sojourn there, that the purposes of God might be fulfilled, in the preservation of the church; it saved from extinction the chosen race from which, "as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed forever;"¹ and so the tender plant that blossomed out into the great salvation was not blasted in the bud; and down to the present day we are enjoying the precious fruits of those seven years in which there was neither earing nor harvest.

And now, as then, and evermore, this is a faithful saying, all our sorrows are salutary and sanctifying. There is no peradventure about it, "we know that all things work together for good to them that love God."² We know this from our own experience as well as from the infallible Word. "All things work together for good." Not some things, but "all things": seasons of famine as well as fruitful seasons; painful things as well as pleasant; the cursing no less than the blessing. We may not be able always to see the good in the evil, because "no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."³ In the tear-watered fields of darkness and sorrow, "Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart."⁴ And "they that sow in tears shall reap in joy."⁵

¹ Rom. ix. 5.² Rom. viii. 28.³ Heb. xii. 11.⁴ Ps. xcvi. 11.⁵ Ps. cxxvi. 5.

It often comes to pass that the loss of property makes us richer toward God. We love the world, and as riches increase we set our hearts upon them. Perceiving this, our heavenly Father gives wings to our wealth, and it flies away. So He weans us from the world, and makes us rich in the enduring substance. Temporal poverty is the chosen path, by which He leads many of His people to great spiritual prosperity; not because He is pleased to see any of His saints suffering, for want of the comforts and necessities of life, but because the love of the world is so strong in them that it can be rooted out in no other way. And so they learn that "Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better."¹

And personal sickness is often a greater blessing than perfect health. It may not seem so, when we are suddenly snatched away from our business and our pleasures, and prostrated on a bed of languishing, and "wearisome nights" are appointed to us; but yet there is no place where the graces grow so fast and shine so bright as in the sick-room. The burning fever, the tossing to and fro, and the frequent weeping,—like the sunshine and the showers of summer,—make the harvest of the heart to ripen quickly into "the beauties of holiness;"² and where we expect to find impatience, fretfulness, and repining, we see resignation, cheerfulness, and heavenly-mindedness in their perfection.

It is an interesting fact in natural history, that the

¹ Eccl. vii. 3.

² Ps. cx. 3.

cutting, irritating grain of sand, which sometimes passes within the shell of the oyster, makes the living inmate sick, and incites him to secrete from his own resources the means of coating the intrusive substance, to render its presence less painful, and a pearl is the result. By this strange process, the hurtful, worthless grain of sand becomes pleasant and precious. So our sicknesses, when rightly improved, become pearls of great price. And looking back at our broken health, and remembering what it has done for us, we have reason to say with the Psalmist, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted."¹

Besides, by the blessing of God, our sorrows may result in good to others as well as to ourselves. We could not live for ourselves only, if we would; and that we may be of more service to the church and the world, we have another baptism than that of water, and another ordination than that of the laying on of hands: we are baptized with "the wormwood and the gall;"² and are ordained by the laying on of crosses. Without this higher and holier consecration in the fiery furnace, we might be sons of thunder to hard-hearted sinners, but we could not be sons of consolation to broken-hearted saints; and striving in vain out of our untried hearts to speak peace to those who are in trouble, they might be tempted to turn upon our cold platitudes, saying, with something of its original sharpness, "I have heard many such things: miserable comforters are ye all."³

As an apt illustration of this thought in all its

¹ Ps. cxix. 71.

² Lam. iii. 19.

³ Job xvi. 2.

aspects, we would point you to the chiefest of the apostles. Saul of Tarsus was a young man of great learning and influence; and had you lived in his day, and seen him "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord,"¹ you would have feared for the fate of the infant church; had you seen him arming himself with authority from the chief priests, and setting out for Damascus, like a red-handed robber, to take and torture the saints residing there, your heart would have "trembled for the ark of God."² But yet, behold how wonderfully these things worked together for good. Jesus met the monster by the way, and blinded him that he might see, and having changed his heart, He sent him on another mission; and so the prince of persecutors became the prince of preachers, and only lived to glory in the cross: "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."³

In like manner, all things, whether great or small, whether good or bad, are ordained of God and over-ruled for good to them that love Him. Of the many trials that He sends upon us here, not one is unprofitable, not one is unseasonable, not one is unbecoming: "He hath made every thing beautiful in his time."⁴ There is a burning lamp in every smoking furnace; a sweet cordial in every bitter cup; and our deepest and most desperate sorrows may rise up into a very jubilee of joy, and bring the greatest revenue of glory unto God.

¹ Acts ix. 1.

² I Sam. iv. 13.

³ Gal. vi. 14.

⁴ Eccl. iii. 11.

On the Rhine, in Germany, there is a dingy castle with two high towers rising up above the rest of the building. The old baron, who owns and occupies the fortress as his home, stretched several strong wires from one tower over to the other, constructing what might be called an *Æolian* harp. In pleasant summer weather, the ordinary winds produce no effect upon this instrument, and it is perfectly silent. But in the winter season, when the terrible tornado comes rushing along, breaking the trees and shaking the mountains with its trampling thunder, and with the fingers of its fury smites those silent strings, then, they send forth the grandest strains of music that the ear ever heard.

In every one of our hearts there is an *Æolian* harp which was made, for His good pleasure, by the "Great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ,"¹ who dwells therein; and day and night, without ceasing, thanksgiving and the voice of melody should rise to Him who strung the wondrous lyre. But yet, for weeks and months, and sometimes for years, we are dumb. The soft and spicy breezes that cheer the homes of health and wealth, and the sweet and gentle zephyrs that gladden the hours of peace and prosperity, make no impression on our hearts and minds, and fail to wake any music within us "to the praise of the glory of His grace."² But when adversity comes at the command of God, or disappointment, or bereavement, or all of them together, like a rushing, mighty tempest, and all our hopes are blasted

¹ Tit. ii. 13.

² Eph. i. 6.

all at once,—then, “the stormy wind fulfilling His word,”¹ sweeps sighing through the soul, and straightway there rises up to heaven, in a hurricane of praise, this song of sorrows, which is sweeter than any that the angels sing: “Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.”

As “all the rivers run into the sea,”² so all our remarks run into this benediction, “Blessed are they that mourn.”³ Dearly beloved, fellow-sinners and fellow-sufferers, no matter what your outward circumstances may be, it is your duty and your privilege to be happy. Your brightest hopes may be blasted, your fondest expectations cut off, and there may be to you a total failure of every earthly comfort; but in the time of famine, you shall have better meat to eat than those whose “eyes stand out with fatness;”⁴ and you shall learn that the harp of the human heart yields its sweetest music when it is broken. “Is not the gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?”⁵

A converted Brahmin at his baptism lost his houses, his lands, his wells, his wife and his children. To a sympathizing friend, who asked him how he bore his sorrows, and if he was supported under them, he answered, saying, “I am often asked that, but I

¹ Ps. cxlviii. 8.

² Eccl. i. 7.

³ Mat. v. 4.

⁴ Ps. lxxiii. 7.

⁵ Judges viii. 2.

am never asked how I bear my joys; for I have joys within me which are unspeakable and full of glory. The Lord Jesus sought me out and found me, a poor stray sheep in the jungles; He brought me to His fold, and He will never leave me."

This same lofty plane in Christian experience may be attained by you. The ladder Jacob saw reached above the winds and clouds, and with the hands and feet of faith and hope, you may climb beyond them now, and be happy henceforth and forever. Your property may pass from your possession to pay your debts, as far as it will go, and you may be poor; your father and mother may forsake you; and your brothers and sisters may disown you—but there is a brother "born for adversity";¹ "there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother."² His name is Jesus; and in Him and with Him, you may have the best of the wealth of heaven before you get there: "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things."³

Your first-born—yes, and your last-born—may be dead and buried. With rivers of waters running down your eyes you watched beside his dying bed; with a trembling hand you parted the hair on his noble forehead, and wiped the death-dews from his beautiful face, and in your arms of love he fell on sleep. He was the dearest idol of your heart, and with grief too great for tears, you saw him shrouded, you saw him coffined, you saw him sepulchred. Yes, he is

¹ Prov. xvii. 17.

² Prov. xviii. 24.

³ II Cor. vi. 10.

gone. You know that he is gone; you see his vacant chamber and his empty chair; yet not unfrequently you find yourself speaking softly, and stepping lightly, as if afraid to awake him out of sleep. And your sorrow may seem peculiar, like unto which there is no sorrow; but you should not sorrow so, "even as others which have no hope."¹ Nay, rather, you should count it all joy, and glory in your great tribulation. Jesus wanted another jewel for His "crown of rejoicing,"² and He took your son. Jesus wanted another hand to handle another heavenly harp, and He took your only son. Jesus wanted a new voice to aid the new song, and He took your one only son. And just because Jesus took him you ought to rejoice and be exceeding glad. For verily I say unto you, there are fewer blessings that call for louder songs of praise than a son safe in heaven. "While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."³

"Hear, O Lord, and have mercy upon me; Lord, be thou my helper. Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing; thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness, to the end that my glory may sing praise to thee, and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks unto thee forever."⁴

¹ I Thess. iv. 13.

² I Thess. ii. 19.

³ II Sam. xii. 22, 23.

⁴ Ps. xxx. 10-12.

JESUS, MASTER: with seasons of famine and fruitful seasons, with judgments and mercies, with tears and smiles, with sighs of grief, and songs of gladness, thou art weaving our web of life; and always and everywhere, the darkness and the drops of the night are lusted with thy love. We bless thy dearest hands for all their guiding, and thy dearest heart for all its planning. But most of all, we bless thee, for the blasts and blows and burnings of thy brotherly kindness, by which we have been, in some measure, separated and set free from sin, and made partakers of thine own holiness. Let it please thee to continue to work in us and for us, according to the good pleasure of thy sweet will; and help us, by the strength and beauty of thy grace, to rise above submission and resignation, into the heavenly places of perfect peace and perfect love; where we can glory in tribulation and rejoice evermore. And when thou hast done serving thyself with us, in this land of sundown and the shadow of death, take us up to that bright world, where the sun shall no more go down, and there shall be no more death. And not unto us, but unto Him who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever.

THE BEAUTIFUL CLOUDS.



CHAPTER VIII.

"And now men see not the bright light which is in the clouds: but the wind passeth and cleanseth them. Fair weather cometh out of the north."—JOB xxxvii. 21, 22.

THERE is a remarkable analogy between natural and spiritual things, which the most casual observer must have noticed. We are the children of a changing world, and all that the heavens and the earth express to the eye and ear corresponds to something in the mind. The sublime psalmody of external things; the deep-toned thunder storm; the moaning of the melancholy sea; the sighing of the winds in the pine-tree tops; the murmuring of water brooks; and the sweet music of birds,—are all in harmony with the harp of the human heart. And the face of the sky is frequently the most faithful representation of the feelings of the soul. The day and night, summer and winter, seed-time and harvest, all have their counterpart in Christian experience.

When her beloved was far away beyond the mountains of Bether, the bride was lonely and sad, and "sick of love";¹ her house was left desolate, and her garden had lost all its beauty: it was winter without, and it was winter within. But when he came again, "leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon

¹ Cant. ii. 5.

the hills,"¹ lo, the winter was past, the rain was over and gone, the flowers appeared on the earth, and the time of the singing of birds was come. So when our heavenly Bridegroom withdraws Himself from us, it is winter within, though it may be summer without;—it is an Arctic winter, and its long, dark night is more distressing than its piercing cold. But when Jesus returns, both are speedily dispelled. The rising "Sun of righteousness"² drives away the darkness, and thaws the frozen garden of the heart, while the soft, south wind wakes to fan its opening flowers, till the spices thereof flow forth, with all the sweetness of a joyous spring.

You will observe, at once, the connection between these preliminary remarks and the text: "Now men see not the bright light which is in the clouds: but the wind passeth and cleanseth them." As in the natural sky we sometimes notice dark clouds, beautifully tinted with the bright light that shines in and around them, so the clouds which come in the sky of the soul are lined with the light of heavenly love, and fringed with rays from the excellent glory. In other words, our afflictions are always accompanied with certain alleviating circumstances, by which they are not only mitigated, but rendered positively attractive.

In the revolution of the earth around the sun, there are two opposing forces which prevail against each other—if I may speak so—to keep it in its appointed path: the one acting alone would draw the earth into the sun, and burn it up before the time; the

¹ Cant. ii. 8.

² Mal. iv. 2.

other acting alone would drive it away, we know not whither, and it would become a wandering star. So both forces are essentially necessary in order to keep the earth in its own orbit; and they are so nicely balanced in the scales of Him "who hangeth the earth upon nothing,"¹ that it never deviates a hair's breadth from its appointed path in the heavens, bringing every year the pleasant succession of the seasons. And that one side of the earth might not be always exposed to the sun, and the other side always deprived of his beams,—both of which would be equally bad,—the all-wise Creator has given another motion to the earth, by which it turns completely round on its axis every twenty-four hours; so dividing the light from the darkness, making the day and the night, which are not only useful in their alternations, but indispensable to the well-being of the world and they that dwell therein.

By a similar process of changes and counter-changes in the moral world, our heavenly Father preserves the even tenor of our lives. And, without controversy, compensations are the rule of His gracious providence. Over against prosperity He has set adversity, to keep us in His own right way; and after every night of weeping there is a morning of joy: along-side of "great tribulation" He places "strong consolation"; our crosses are balanced by as many comforts, and every judgment has its corresponding mercy. When God smites with one hand, He upholds with the other; when one door shuts, He opens

¹ Job xvi. 7.

another; and when one friend fails, He raises up another. The same day that Faithful was burned to ashes at the stake, in Vanity Fair, Hopeful joined himself to Christian; and Hopeful was better than Faithful.

In the wilderness the Israelites were supplied with "the corn of heaven," and "did eat angels' food."¹ After the slaughter of a thousand Philistines, when Samson was like to die for thirst, he was revived by drinking of a well of water springing from a dry place.² When Jonathan was faint and weary, he was refreshed and enlightened by tasting of the honeycomb which he found in the woods.³ When there was given unto Paul the thorn in the flesh, and the messenger of Satan came to buffet him, the grace of Christ was equal to the great emergency.

So opportunely have all the saints found bread and water and honey and grace to help in time of need. The wilderness privileges are set over against the wilderness privations, making the desert blossom as the rose, and more to be desired than the wealthy place: "Behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the days when she came up out of the land of Egypt."⁴

In places where we least expected, and at times

¹ Ps. lxxviii. 25.

² Judges xv. 19.

³ I Sam. xiv. 27.

⁴ Hos. ii. 14, 15.

when we looked not for them, how often have wells of heavenly consolation burst forth beside the path of our pilgrimage! When all "the upper springs and the nether springs"¹ were dry as summer dust, and we were going in vain to the broken cisterns of human sympathy, how often has our wayfaring God pointed us to "a spring shut up, a fountain sealed."²

Such remarkable coincidences may seem, to some, like the effect of chance; but they are what the Bible student would call predestination; and were foreordained for our special comfort. By their timely coming and blessed influence, they not only soften our sorrows, but make them splendid and sublime; and in a little while we learn to love them; and not only so, but we glory in them. What appeared only evil is actually good; and the cloud in which there seemed to be no comeliness at all, now shines with "the perfection of beauty."

There is a bright light in every black cloud which our heavenly Father is pleased to weave in the ever-changing canopy of His beloved and believing children. There was a blessing in the curse pronounced on our first parents and their posterity. That which was only a pleasant occupation, in the state of innocence, has become a burden scarcely to be borne. Instead of keeping and dressing the garden of Eden, which spontaneously yielded all the necessities and luxuries of life, we are sent out into a world blasted with barrenness, and doomed to eat our bread in sorrow.

¹ Judges i. 15.

² Cant. iv. 12.

But in those drops of sweat that burst upon our brow there is more of good than evil, and more of joy than sorrow. Rest and recreation owe all their deliciousness to exercise and employment. There is health and happiness and holiness in hard work. Manual labor is the best school for the development of the body, and the discipline of the mind; it is a sanctuary also for the sanctification of the soul. Every blow of the axe and the hammer and the iron tools contributes something to the perfection of our nature; and true wisdom will bless the Lord for the stern ministry of the thorns and thistles,—those task masters which He hath set over us in the world. In the sweat of thy face, “Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God.”¹

The order of the king of Egypt, exterminating all the male children of the Hebrews, was a very dreadful thing; and the day that it was issued was a dark day in Goshen. At first it seemed to be a cloud without any brightness at all; no silver lining lighted up its earthward side, nor golden fringe hung down from the hem of its garment. But in a little while there came a sunburst through it, and, in due season, the light of God’s countenance changed all its gloom into glory. In that bloody edict the blessed exodus was planted. It set in motion a train of special providences by which “Moses my servant” was preserved alive, contrary to the king’s commandment; and in Pharaoh’s palace the “proper child”² was nurtured, who, when he became a man, was mainly instru-

¹ Rom. xi. 22.

² Heb. xi. 23.

mental in the deliverance of Israel: and under a bright cloud they went up out of their house of bondage.

The early death of Stephen was a great calamity, and seemed to be only evil in its consequences. He was a young man of much promise; the field of usefulness was widening before him, and the infant church could scarcely spare him. But his martyrdom was the mother of a wonderful blessing to the world. It was a ray of beautiful light, beaming from his angel-like face, that carried conviction to the darkened mind of Paul, who "was consenting unto his death,"¹ and guarding the garments of his murderers. After that great sight, the proud young Pharisee found no peace till he went and washed his guilty hands in the blood of Jesus, and so the prince of persecutors became the prince of preachers.

The crucifixion of Christ was, without doubt, the greatest crime that was ever committed; the darkest deed that this world ever witnessed. The murder of Jesus was worse than homicide, for He was more than man; it was worse than fratricide, for He was better than brother; it was worse than parricide, for He was more than father. A new word had to be coined to express the act, and it is properly called *deicide*, because the man Christ Jesus was "The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of peace."² Yes, I speak considerably, and according to the Scriptures, when I say that a Divine Person suffered on the cross: "In whom we have redemption

¹ Acts viii. 1.

² Isa. ix. 6.

through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins; who is the image of the invisible God.”¹ Is it any wonder then, that the sun went down over Calvary, when it was yet day, and that there was darkness throughout all the land from the sixth until the ninth hour? Nay, the wonder rather is, that the sun ever rose again after “the Lord of glory”² died: “For by Him were all things created.”³ But yet, in that greatest of all crimes there was the sweetest of all comforts; and out of that blackest darkness that ever gathered over the earth, there dawned the brightest light of heaven; there was life in that death, even the life of the world; and the love of God never burst forth so gloriously, as when the bitter tree of the cross budded and blossomed into the great salvation: “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.”⁴

The silver linings are not always manifest in the clouds of life; and it is not strange that some people can not see them, “because they are spiritually discerned.”⁵ During that dark and doleful night, when the stormy sea was before the flying Hebrews, and their enemies were behind them, breathing out cruelty and slaughter against them, and there seemed to be no escape from sudden destruction, “the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them: and it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel: and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these.”⁶ So the same dark divine dispensation

¹ Col. i. 14, 15.² I Cor. ii. 8.³ Col. i. 16.⁴ Rom. v. 20.⁵ I Cor. ii. 14.⁶ Exod. xiv. 19, 20.

which is all brightness to the eye of the believer, is blackness of darkness to the unbeliever; though the difference is not so much in the cloud as in the spectator.

But even the best of Christians, who are on the bright side of the cloud, are not always blest with such clear seeing as to discern the good in the evil: "Now men see not the bright light which is in the clouds." The alleviating circumstance accompanies their affliction, but they do not perceive it. It was a day of desperate sorrow, the light of which was darkness itself, when Hagar was sent away from Abraham's home. The thing seemed so cruel to "the friend of God,"¹ that he never would have thought of it, but for Sarah; nor could she have persuaded him to put the bondwoman away, had he not received a message direct from heaven concerning the matter. "And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba."²

But the wilderness without was a perfect paradise in comparison of the wilderness within. And in a little while, when the bread was all eaten, and "the water was spent in the bottle," she cast the lad under one of the shrubs, and went away about a bow-shot, that she might not see the last struggle. Just then and there, in that wilderness, and in the moment of extremest anguish, when she was sitting down and

¹ James ii. 23.

² Gen. xxi. 14.

weeping under the shadow of death,—the darkness of which was doubled,—just then and there, “God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water.”¹ That well was there before, but she could not see it till her eyes were opened.

When the children of Israel came to Marah, they were greatly disappointed, and murmured exceedingly. They had been already “three days in the wilderness and found no water.” And now, after so long a time, when a spring was discovered its waters were bitter, and they could not drink them. But in that great emergency—as in many sore trials—Moses went to the mercy-seat: “And he cried unto the Lord; and the Lord showed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet.”² That healing tree was there before; it grew in that vicinity, and perhaps so near by, that its branches shaded the bitter spring; but its properties were not known, and were only revealed to Moses in answer to prayer: “the Lord showed him a tree.”

When the prophet's servant rose early one morning, he made the sorrowful discovery, that the city of Dothan—where they sojourned—was invested with “horses and chariots, and a great host,”³ which the king of Syria had sent there by night to arrest Elisha. And returning quickly, the leal-hearted servant said, with manifest apprehension, “Alas, my master! how shall we do? And he answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord I pray

¹ Gen. xxi. 19.

² Exod. xv. 25.

³ II Kings vi. 14.

thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha."¹ The horses and chariots of heaven were there before, they were always there, but the servant could not see them till his eyes were opened.

As Cleophas and his companion "went into the country,"² shortly after the crucifixion, a seeming stranger joined their company, and journeyed with them, as they walked and were sad. And entering into conversation with them concerning their sorrow, He took it all away and gave them good cheer; they remembered it afterwards: "Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us by the way?" Their pleasant travelling companion was none other than Jesus Himself; "But their eyes were holden that they should not know Him."³ When they reached Emmaus, "He made as though He would have gone further;" but they constrained Him to abide with them. He had entertained them so much along the road that they could not bear to part with Him; besides, it was "toward evening," and the day was far spent. "And He went in to tarry with them. And it came to pass, as He sat at meat with them, He took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened and they knew Him."⁴

Though there are times when we can not discern

¹ II Kings vi. 15-17.

² Mark xvi. 12.

³ Luke xxiv. 16.

⁴ Luke xxiv. 29-31.

the brightness which is in the clouds, that gather in the firmament of the soul, they are not of long continuance. In due season, the brightest sunshine of the Saviour's best love will break through the thickest blackness, and we shall be satisfied with seeing: "Now men see not the bright light which is in the clouds: but the wind passeth and cleanseth them. Fair weather cometh out of the north." It is the keen, cold wind, blowing from the regions of everlasting snow, by which the clouds are cleared, and the sky is made to shine like "gold."¹

So one severe affliction is often alleviated by another; one blow is softened down by another blow. The loss of property is mitigated by the loss of health. In taking thought for ourselves, we almost forget the filthy lucre which slipped away, like quicksilver through our fingers. The death of one beloved member of the family becomes less crushing in its pressure when another is prostrated by the same dreadful disease; and the "mother in Israel,"² who, like Rachel, refuses to be comforted for the loss of her children, is sometimes weaned from her grief by the alarming illness of her husband. Such is the way in which a kind Providence, through anxiety, withdraws the heart from anguish, till the same hand that bruised the reed shall gently bind it up again.

But a change in the weather within is more indispensable to clear seeing than a change in the weather without. As we have already intimated, the brightness is always in the cloud, and if we do not see it

¹ Job xxxvii. 22 (marginal reading).

² Judges v. 7.

the fault is in ourselves. We may be on the wrong side of the cloud, like the Egyptians; or we may be on the right side of it, and not looking at it in the right way: "For now we see through a glass darkly."¹ But as the illuminating Spirit pours light into our benighted minds, this dark medium becomes clearer; and not unfrequently those things which we thought would obstruct our vision are sent of very purpose to aid it. We are tempted to complain, at times, that our eyes are blinded with unbidden tears. But tears are never unbidden; for the kind and mighty Jesus, who keeps a bottle for them, always bids them flow. Neither are they blinding in their influence; but, contrariwise, they are the holy water of heaven, with which He washes our eyes that we may see better. He often makes a telescope of them that we may see further; for tears are lenses of the greatest magnifying power when looking upward, and greatly aid our feeble faith in "seeing Him who is invisible."² How strange it is, that Christians should be afraid of afflictions, and that they should begin to despond as soon as the skies begin to darken round them, as if some great calamity was coming to crush them.

"Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take:
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head."

While the clouds are only black and breaking with storms of sorrow, it is hard to believe that there is

¹ I Cor. xiii. 12.

² Heb. xi. 27.

any brightness or beauty in them; but, like many other things, they are better than they seem. We have learned by experience that the thorniest judgments blossom into the sweetest mercies. Thus saith the Lord to His anointed, "I will give thee the treasures of darkness."¹ Since the Master was "a man of sorrows," sorrow is sanctified and glorified beyond all telling.

Yes, in spite of her black visage, languid eyes, and dark mantle, sorrow is a beautiful princess, and walks abroad "the queen of hearts.—I had almost said the queen of heaven, because she comes from heaven to make us meet for heaven. There is a divine beauty in every feature of her face; and a divine blessing in every blow of her hand. She wounds to heal, casts us down to lift us higher up, and kills us to make us alive again; and when she brings us to our Gethsemane, the strengthening angel will be sure to follow, and that right speedily. Blessed be God for the grasp of every grief in which the men of grace have found glory begun below. "Ascribe ye strength unto God; His excellency is over Israel, and His strength is in the clouds."²

"Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."³ The word "seemeth" in this scripture is well chosen, because afflictions may be joyous when they seem not so; and their peaceable fruits might be gathered much sooner than they often

¹ Isa. xlv. 3.

² Ps. lxxviii. 34.

³ Heb. xii. 11.

are. In God's husbandry "the ploughman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed."¹ Grief grows so quickly into grace and glory, that the weeping sower and the rejoicing reaper may go forth together; and the same day shall be the seed-time and the harvest of the heart: "He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."²

When rightly viewed, the thick clouds of the sky are very beautiful; and the brightness which adorns them seems borrowed from the better country. A friend of ours, who was sojourning for a season at the Catskill Mountain House, wrote to us after this manner, concerning a day-spring view of the clouds from that lofty height: "It was a dark morning; and as I almost ran to reach the best point of observation soon enough, it was intimated by one of my companions, that I would not see much, because it was too misty. Nevertheless I went on, feeling that something glorious would be revealed; and it was glorious beyond description. An angel's pencil could not depict the splendor of the scene, nor an angel's tongue express its beauty. Passing from the grand piazza seemed like embarking on a sea of glory. Nothing could be seen at first, but mist clouds, which filled the valleys below, and covered the mountains which were round about. Presently the messenger rays of the morning came struggling through them, making their darkness bright, and clothing them with the

¹ Amos ix. 13.

² Ps. cxxvi. 6.

robes of the rainbow. In a little while the sun himself appeared, 'Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race.'¹ As he rose higher and higher, he smiled upon the clouds till they smiled back again, and seemed all ablaze with borrowed glory; and overcome with feelings of admiration and amazement, I closed my tired eyes, thinking that I had seen it all. But, after a moment's pause, I looked again, and saw another sight far more beautiful. The clouds of mist were rising and rolling like the waves of the ocean, and the sun's rays glorified them all. They gathered themselves together into delectable mountains, and from their bright tops, tall spires of vapor, sparkling as with sapphires, stretched upward towards the sun. As one of them rose above the rest, flashing like a flaming sword, it seemed to draw the others after it, till at last all were exhaled. It was long before all this beauty vanished from my view; and when it had passed away, the drops of dissolving mist fell pattering on the leaves like pearls, hung every bush with brilliants, and shone like diamonds on the grass. Had it been a morning without clouds, the sunrise would have been shorn of more than half its glory." But as a dim candle dies at noonday, so all this surpassing splendor fades away before the far out rivaling brightness which beautifies the saints' cloud, when God gilds it with grace and glory.

We seldom observe the clouds flitting in the firmament of heaven, without feelings of reverence and

¹ Ps. xix. 5.

adoration for Him, who is so much associated with them. They are God's pavilion,—the tent in which He dwells: "Clouds and darkness are round about Him:"¹ they are His carriage; the conveyance in which He travels, "Who maketh the clouds His chariot."² In the night of weeping, and every night, how safe we are! The angel of the Lord and the Lord of angels encampeth round about us; and in the fourth watch, and in its darkest hour, He comes driving down the starless sky to our relief, and the light of His countenance, travelling faster than His chariot wheels, turns our rayless night to perfect day.

"In darkest shades if He appear
My dawning is begun;
He is my soul's bright morning star,
And He my rising sun."

It is interesting and instructive to notice in this connection, that clouds and darkness are the natural and necessary attendants of this world, and the heavenly messengers of many blessings to mankind. In some way, unknown to us, they help to create those storms which purify the atmosphere. In the summer's heat they hang a friendly veil over the fiery face of the sun; and all the year round they carry water for the thirsty earth: "The clouds drop down the dew:"³ "They drop upon the pastures of the wilderness: and the little hills rejoice on every side. The pastures are clothed with flocks; the val-

¹ Ps. xcvi. 2.

² Ps. civ. 3.

³ Prov. iii. 20.

leys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing."¹

In our present state of being, the clouds and darkness of sorrow are also natural and necessary, and exceedingly beneficent. Without their refreshing showers, our plants of grace would droop and die; and we could not make such good progress in the divine life, if indeed we could make any. Were the path of our pilgrimage perfumed with perennial flowers, and nothing but sunbeams played around our moving tent, it would soon cease to move altogether, and we would forget that we are strangers and pilgrims here. This rainbow dispensation, with its clouds and sunshine, its tears and smiles, is the very best that could be ordained for us: "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the light shall not be clear, nor dark: but it shall be one day which shall be known to the Lord, not day, nor night: but it shall come to pass that at evening time it shall be light."²

In one of the European galleries of fine arts there is a celebrated German picture called "The Cloud Land." As you enter the door of the room, and look at it hanging on the distant wall, you do not know what to make of it. It seems like one great cloud: nothing else but "blackness of darkness." As you go a little nearer, and look at it more earnestly, it seems like many clouds gathered together. When you go still nearer and get the right stand-point, it changes like a dissolving view, and what seemed at first to be a mass of gloom is now "a multitude of the

¹ Ps. lxx. 12, 13.

² Zech. xiv. 6, 7.

heavenly host." All the clouds are angels, and there are hundreds of angel faces smiling on you; and hundreds of angel wings hovering over you; and hundreds of angel arms outstretched to embrace you. Dearly beloved, be not forgetful to entertain afflictions: "For thereby some have entertained angels unawares."¹

It is still more interesting and instructive to remember, in closing, that beyond the dark clouds which are of the earth earthy, there is a region of uninterrupted and eternal sunshine. On the other side of this valley of Baca, there is a better country than Beulah; and after this night of weeping is over and ended, there will be a morning without an evening: "a morning without clouds,"² where perfect day, and perfect peace, and perfect love shall be enjoyed perpetually.

The clouds which gather round our globe cling close to its surface, and seldom rise above the tops of our highest mountains. When he was ascending the Andes, Humboldt says that he could see the forked lightning darting from the black clouds beneath him, and hear the pealing thunder far down under his feet, when all was tranquil, clear, and delightful above and around him. So when we ascend to heaven, we shall leave all the dark clouds behind us, with all their storms, and dwell in the land of pure delight, where the sun is always shining, and the birds are always singing, and the flowers are always blooming. What a happy place heaven must

¹ Heb. xiii. 2.

² II Sam. xxiii. 4.

be! The very thought of it makes me homesick. "The beautiful die never there." "And there shall be no night there: and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign forever and ever."¹

We can not quit our theme,—so beautiful and sweet of fragrance,—without reminding you, as well, that beyond this life of lights and shadows, joys and sorrows, meetings and partings, there is a place of unmitigated and everlasting misery. And painful though it be to pass from a thought so pleasant as our last, to one so unpalatable, we may not overlook it, because there is in the text a foretoken of both the worlds beyond the grave. Through its bright light there comes to us a gleam of heaven's glory, and in its black clouds there is a glimpse of the gloom of hell: that place of blackness of darkness, where "the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever."² It is a dreadful place that pit. There will be no joy down there; there will be no light down there; there will be no hope down there; there will be nothing down there, but weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus, my God and Saviour, "gather not my soul with sinners, nor my life with bloody men, and let not the pit shut her mouth upon me."³

¹ Rev. xxii. 5. ² Rev. xiv. 11. ³ Ps. xxvi. 9, and lxix. 15.

THE THORN IN THE FLESH.

CHAPTER IX.

"And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."—II COR. xii. 7-9.

IN the glorious company of the apostles, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, and the noble army of martyrs, Paul has confessedly the highest place. The chief of sinners has become the chief of saints; and he who was "less than the least"¹ of all in the kingdom of grace, is now the greatest of all in the kingdom of glory. Of all the holy men of old,—from righteous Abel, downward to the present day,—he was the most honored, because he is the only one who was ever "caught up into paradise," and brought back again; whether in the body or out of the body he could not tell. But as the seeds of our most painful sorrows are often planted in our purest joys, so in this visit to heaven there was a taste of hell; for as the apostle was coming away from the realms of bliss, he met a "messenger of Satan," who began to buffet him and continued to buffet him for more

¹ Eph. iii. 8.

than thirty years. And though there can be no communion between light and darkness, nor concord between Christ and Belial, yet there is a proper scripture sense in which this messenger of Satan was also the messenger of God; and all his evil buffetings were so balanced and borne and blest, that they resulted in nothing but good. As the thorns and thistles of the original curse blossom into the fairest and most fragrant flowers that adorn the earth, so this "thorn in the flesh," this thistle of hell, opened out and up into the grace and glory of heaven.

What the thorn was, we are not told, and of course we do not know for certain. To count up and consider the various opinions concerning it, might be interesting to many; but it would take us away too far from our present purpose. Besides, it would have too much the appearance of a useless pedantry. Whatever it was, it seems to have been something that detracted much from the apostle's personal appearance, subjected him to great humiliation, and was calculated to hinder and hamper him in his "work of faith and labor of love."¹ It was doubtless an abiding infirmity, which troubled and tormented him day and night without ceasing.

And though it may be nothing more than a probable conjecture, we are inclined to accept the opinion that it was an affection of the eyes. If the apostle was in the body when he was "caught up to the third heaven," what he saw there might have impaired his sense of sight. Nay, it must have done

¹ I Thess. i. 3.

so; because no mortal eye could gaze at the glory excelling of God's own dwelling-place without being blinded. Intense light of any kind, as every one knows, is injurious to the eyes. Men have been blinded for a season by the brightness of a burning lamp; they have been permanently blinded by looking at the sun during an eclipse; and a flash of lightning has sometimes destroyed the sight.

In Paul's own experience we have the best illustration of the blinding influence of excessive brightness. When he was going to Damascus, to persecute the followers of Christ in that beautiful city, "suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven."¹ It was about noon, but the light from heaven was "above the brightness of the sun";² and by it the apostle was smitten with blindness; for he says himself, "I could not see for the glory of that light."³ He could not see for three days, and, doubtless, never would have seen again, if a miracle had not been wrought to restore his lost sense.

And if the light from heaven had such an injurious effect upon Paul, what must have been the effect of the light of heaven, when we know that "the Lamb is the light thereof?"⁴ If a brief glimpse of the Saviour's glory actually blinded him, surely it should not be counted a strange thing, if, when he saw "the King in His beauty,"⁵ the dazzling brightness of the beatific vision quenched the light of life in those

¹ Acts ix. 3.

² Acts xxvi. 13.

³ Acts xxii. 11.

⁴ Rev. xxi. 23.

⁵ Isa. xxxiii. 17.

bewildered eyes that enjoyed the ravishing sight till they could see no more.

And if Paul was not in the body when caught up into Paradise, was such an effect impossible or improbable? If, as is a well-known fact, some sudden, strong emotion, as of grief or joy, will cause the pulse to cease to beat, and the heart to stand still, and even to break,—may not the surprising revelations of heaven have made such an intense and abiding impression on the spiritual retina of “the inward man,” that after his return to the earthly house of this tabernacle, the “outward man” might have been blinded by the brightness of that glory that lingered in the soul, like the light of God’s countenance that lingered on the face of Moses when he came down from the mount?

But, however this may be, whichever of the suppositions is true,—whether Paul was in the body or out of the body,—the piercing pain of a perpetual malady was the price he paid for the privilege of going to Paradise; for what he saw there left a lasting impression on his mind and body both, like that which is felt when “those that look out of the windows be darkened.”¹ Besides, from this time forth the great apostle was almost never alone; and seems never to have taken the shortest journey unattended. Wherever he went, into whatsoever city or village or country he came, he was accompanied by some of his friends. His infirmity, whatever it was, made him dependent upon the kindness of others. It is also

¹ Eccl. xii. 3.

abundantly evident that he usually wrote his epistles by the aid of an amanuensis, and merely signed his name with his salutations, and a brief benediction at the close. And when we remember that most of these epistles were written when the apostle was in prison, where writing would have been a positive pleasure, we can not help thinking that their author would have written the whole of them with his own hand, if such a thing had not been rendered exceedingly difficult, and perhaps quite impossible, by reason of his imperfect vision.

In the last chapter of the epistle to the Galatians, there is an allusion to this very difficulty: "Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand."¹ According to our translation, the apostle is speaking here about the letter which he had just written, and he calls it a large one, and says it was written with his own hand. And it was a proof of his special regard for those to whom it was addressed that he was willing to undergo this unusual labor on their account.

Such is the manifest meaning of our English version; but the best modern commentators are of the opinion that the phrase rendered, "how large a letter," has no reference to the epistle at all, but only to "the size of the characters"² in which he had written the letter. His handwriting was probably poor, the lines were irregular, the letters were large and rude, as a man would be likely to make them who was laboring under the embarrassment of a defective vision.

¹ Gal. vi. 11.

² Conybeare's translation.

Moreover, in another place in this same epistle, remembering the first love, and the former friendship of the Galatians, and deeply sensible of their affection, and the strength of their attachment, the apostle says, "I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me."¹ These devoted friends saw Paul's infirmity, and sympathized with him so much, that, if it had been possible, they would have torn out their own eyes to supply the lack of his. Such is the real meaning of this remarkable expression.

But it makes very little matter what the thorn was, we know beyond peradventure why it was given. Here indeed the apostle has been more explicit than usual. Once in the beginning, and again at the end, of the same short sentence, the reason is plainly stated in these words, "Lest I should be exalted above measure, through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure."

Paul was a proud man; of this there can be no question. Pride was born in him, and bound up in his heart; and for many years it was nourished and cherished there as a precious treasure. He was pre-eminently ambitious, loved the praise of men, and thought more highly of himself than he ought to think. As he advanced in age and learning and influence, his pride increased, till he became the haughtiest man in the world: "If any other man thinketh

¹ Gal. iv. 15.

that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless."¹ But, in spite of this ever-present infirmity, Paul was a good man, and greatly beloved of God; and in order to prevent his natural propensity from flaunting out into excessive self-esteem, and leading him on to self-destruction, the piercing thorn was planted in his flesh by a messenger of Satan.

Pride is a common sin, and has a home or a hiding-place in every human heart. The high and the low are alike subject to it; and the filthy rags of the beggar are its clothing more frequently than the royal purple of the king. Some men are proud of their riches. Nothing pleases them so much as to go round about their patrimonial acres; and they glory in their great possessions, knowing all the time, that in a little while "six feet by two" is more than they will own, and all that they can occupy. Other men are proud of their pedigree. They belong to an ancient and honorable house, and can trace their blood back to some noble lord; and the family tree is the idol that they worship. But among their illustrious ancestors there are many of whom they can not boast very much, and not a few of whom they ought to be ashamed: "Look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged."²

¹ Phil. iii. 4-6.

² Isa. li. 1.

The altogether lovely Saviour was the flower of the human family, and "the perfection of beauty;" but no man can read the long list of names in "the house and lineage of David,"¹ from which He sprang, without blushing two or three times.

As people prosper in their outward estate their pride is apt to prosper in the same proportion. When Haman reached the highest position in the kingdom of Persia, his pride rose above and spread beyond himself; and he went home and called his friends together, and "told them of the glory of his riches, and the multitude of his children, and all the things wherein the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and servants of the king."² When Nebuchadnezzar was sitting down under his own shadow, the pent-up pride of his heart broke forth through his lips in these "great swelling words of vanity:"³ "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honor of my majesty!"⁴ But, in a little while, the one was hanged on his own gallows, and the other "was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws."⁵ "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."⁶

But pride is not confined to the men of the world.

¹ Luke ii. 4.

² II Pet. ii. 18.

³ Dan. iv. 33.

⁴ Esth. v. 11.

⁵ Dan. iv. 30.

⁶ Prov. xvi. 18.

Long before the days of Diotrephes it joined the church, and here, as everywhere, it "loveth to have the pre-eminence."¹ Pride sits in Moses' seat, wears the mantle of Elijah, preaches in many a pulpit, and puts on the Lord Jesus Christ. It is very prompt and particular in the performance of all duties pertaining to the profession it has made, and often goes beyond the letter of the law having a desire to excel; standing by itself, like itself, it loves to pray in public when it can be seen and heard of men; and it has a form of prayer not only peculiarly appropriate, but well pleasing to its vanity: "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess."²

And those who are in Christ are scarcely less exposed to the bewitching influence of this besetting sin than those who are only in the church. Yea, strange as it may seem, the most eminent saints are, in some respects, most in danger of it; and when they are dwelling nearest to God their danger is the greatest. In "the Song of Songs," we learn that it was when her Lord and Lover had come over the mountains of Bether, and the bride was enjoying the sweetest communion of the Bridegroom, that she received this timely command of caution from Him: "Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines."³ Spiritual self is no better than righteous self; it is no better than sinful self. Nay, it is rather worse than both, because where God has planted

¹ III John 9.² Luke xviii. 11, 12.³ Cant. ii. 15.

grace, we look for the fruits of grace, but too frequently we find only "wild grapes,"¹ and sometimes "nothing but leaves."²

And just here was Paul's most powerful temptation; and never was he so much in danger of going to hell as when he went to heaven. About his conversion there could be no doubt; his progress in holiness was very wonderful, and he enjoyed one privilege that was conferred on no other living man, for he was "caught up into Paradise and heard unspeakable words."³ And it was "through the abundance of the revelations" that he was in danger of being "exalted above measure." And the abiding fear that he might be flattered by his friends, and so puffed up, may have constrained him to keep these revelations a profound secret for fourteen years.

And if we would avoid the strongest temptations to spiritual pride, we should have a care never to boast about our progress towards perfection and our communion with Christ. The most devout and heavenly-minded Christians have no religion to spare, and none to speak of boastingly. It is not wise to be always bringing out to the light that life which is "hid with Christ in God";⁴ nor is it needful so to do, because in its own divine way it will make itself manifest. The glory that sat enthroned on the face of Moses was visible enough to every body but himself. When Stephen was put on trial for his life, "all that sat in the council looking steadfastly on him saw

¹ Isa. v. 2.

² Mark xi. 13.

³ II Cor. xii. 4.

⁴ Col. iii. 3.

his face as it had been the face of an angel."¹ And when the elders of Israel saw the boldness of Peter and John, "they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus."²

It was not because Paul was already proud, "through the abundance of the revelations," but to prevent him from becoming proud that the thorn was given to him. After Jacob's great victory over Omnipotence, when he gained a new name and a blessing besides, to prevent his haughty spirit from running away with himself, as he departed from Peniel, "he halted upon his thigh."³ In our Master's school there is a rod of prevention, as well as a rod of correction; and both of them are good, but the first is better than the last.

Afflictions are often very mysterious when they come; but each sorrow has its separate meaning and its special mission. The chief end of one may be to warn the sinner, or to restore the wandering saint; the chief end of another may be to teach the world's vanity and wean the affections from it; the chief end of another may be to develop the spiritual life, and prepare the immortal soul for its immortal destiny. And whenever we are called to suffer, we may be sure and certain that "the Lord hath a controversy"⁴ with us; and it ought to be our first duty to find out, if possible, the reason of the controversy; and if we are unable to solve the mystery for ourselves, we should take it to the mercy-seat, saying, with one of

¹ Acts vi. 15.

² Acts iv. 13.

³ Gen. xxxii. 31.

⁴ Mic. vi. 2.

old time, "show me wherefore thou contendest with me?"¹ David was afflicted, because he had gone astray, and he knew it well, and confessed it openly: "Before I was afflicted I went astray."² But Paul was afflicted before he went astray. And if the man after God's own heart wandered far from God, who is safe? And if the chiefest of the apostles was prone to wander, who is not? The heart is just as deceitful now as it was then, sin is just as sinful, Satan is just as subtle, and before they are aware, the best Christians may be beginning to backslide: "Strangers have devoured his strength, and he knoweth it not; yea, gray hairs are here and there upon him, yet he knoweth it not."³

Not long ago, perhaps, some great calamity came upon you, and you were crushed before it like a bruised reed; and out of the depths you began to say, "What evil have I done to deserve this chastisement?" And as the result of the strictest self-examination, there was no special wrong-doing on your part. No, you had not gone astray, but you were in danger of so doing: your feet were standing in a slippery place, on the very edge of hell, and beginning to slide, though you knew it not till some blessed sorrow came and delivered you from the second death: "Behold, I will hedge up thy way with thorns, and make a wall that she shall not find her paths."⁴

As soon as the thorn was given to the apostle, he began to pray for its removal: "For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me." In his great distress he knew where to go;

¹ Job x. 2. ² Ps. cxix. 67. ³ Hos. vii. 9. ⁴ Hos. ii. 6.

his refuge was the mercy-seat. He took the thorn to the throne of grace, and asked the good Physician to take it away. He had learned by experience that this was the best thing that he could do with the tormenting thing; and, doubtless, this was the only thing that he could do with any hope of help, because his desperate malady must have been beyond the reach of medicine. But it was not beyond the skill and resources of the kind and mighty Jesus, who opened the eyes of those who were born blind, cast out devils, and raised the dead.

Paul was pre-eminently a man of prayer; he lived to pray, and prayed to live, and loved to pray. Prayer was more and better to him than his meat and drink; it was the most precious privilege that he enjoyed, and he knew something of its prevailing power; and, in this time of his visitation, he practiced a precept that he preached to others: "In every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God."¹ His health and sickness, his hopes and fears, his joys and sorrows, were poured out into the sympathizing heart of his heavenly Friend. He prayed "always with all prayer,"² and "without ceasing";³ so that it is hardly proper to say that he ever went to the mercy-seat, because he was always there.

Besides, he was very particular when he prayed. Whatever the matter was that weighed upon his mind, he "spread it before the Lord."⁴ The prayer

¹ Phil. iv. 6.

² Eph. vi. 18.

³ I Thess. v. 17.

⁴ II Kings xix. 14.

now passing under review shows how careful he was to cast the burden of his care upon Christ. As if he prayed for nothing else, he says: "For this thing I besought the Lord." He wisely made his special trouble the subject of special prayer. When the anxious patient goes to the physician, he minutely relates every symptom of his disease; he tells particularly where the pain is, what like it is, when it came, and all about it, that he may receive the right remedy. So "our beloved brother Paul"¹ went into all the particulars concerning the thorn in the flesh, when he prayed. He doubtless told the Maker of his frame more about it than he has told us. He told Him what it was precisely, how painful it was, how he feared it would hinder his usefulness, and earnestly implored that it might be taken away: "For this thing I besought the Lord."

He prayed three times that the thorn might be removed: "For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me." This may mean that he frequently prayed that he might be delivered from the buffetings of Satan's messenger, because the definite is sometimes put for an indefinite number. Or, it may mean that he sought for relief on three several and solemn occasions. This last is the most probable opinion. Among the Jews, three was a sacred number, and it was customary for them to pray three times, and only three times, for any important blessing, or for the removal of any great calamity; and Paul conformed to this custom of his countrymen.

¹ II Pet. iii. 15.

And not only so, but he might have taken for his pattern the example of Christ, who prayed three times, and only three times; that our cup of trembling might pass from Him.

You remember the scene of the Saviour's special sorrow. It was in the garden of Gethsemane, and at the noon of night, when His great and gentle heart began to break for us men and for our salvation. Feeling the need of human sympathy, He took with Him Peter, James, and John; and feeling greater need of divine sympathy, He fell on His face, and prayed, saying, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."¹ And lifting Himself up with the help of the strengthening angel, He came to His disciples, and "found them sleeping for sorrow";² and after mildly remonstrating with them, because they could not watch with Him one hour, "He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done. And He came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy. And He left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words."³ After this third time, Jesus prayed no more that the cup might pass from Him, but patiently submitted to the will of His heavenly Father. In like manner, when Paul had prayed three times that the thorn might be taken away, he ceased his supplications altogether, and acquiesced in the will of God.

¹ Mat. xxvi. 39.

² Luke xxii. 45.

³ Mat. xxvi. 42-44.

And here as elsewhere we learn to glory in the time of trouble. This part of the text seems like a guide-post with an index finger pointed at it pointing to the Lord: "our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Prayer is a power mightier than omnipotence: it is like a very precious privilege. One while it brings us up to heaven, and another while it brings heaven down to us.

"And glory moves the merry-sen."

When David was mourning and fasting and praying, the Lord Jesus came to see him, and touched him, and lifted him up from the ground and talked with him, saying, "Thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words."

Trouble always brings Jesus near to those who love Him and serve Him for love. Sorrow is only another name for the royal chariot of heaven, "paved with love," in which He who was once "a man of sorrows" comes driving down the darkened sky, with every axle glowing, to comfort those whom He has betrothed to Himself forever. With His own dear hands He gently removes the ashes from their heads, bowed down with grief, and crowns them with a bridal diadem of flowers: from His horn of plenty He pours the oil of joy so abundantly into their broken hearts, that there is no room for mourning any more: He unbinds the black "sackcloth of hair" from their fainting spirits, and girds them up with

¹ Ps. xli. 1.

² Dan. x. 12.

³ Cant. iii. 10.

⁴ Isa. liii. 3.

⁵ Rev. vi. 12.

the bright garment of praise, the beautiful "raiment of needlework," which is the wedding garment of His redeemed, and so prepares them for the marriage mansion, and the marriage supper, and the marriage portion: "With gladness and rejoicing shall they be brought; they shall enter into the King's palace."¹ All glory be to the all-lovely Bridegroom for this faithful saying: "Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God."²

It is often doubtless the main design of trouble to bring the Saviour's blood-bought people near to Him. Manasseh was a very wicked man, and as he was king in Jerusalem, his influence for evil was exceeding great. He turned "the house of the Lord" into an idol temple, and built altars in its courts "for all the host of heaven." Like bad men generally, he was very superstitious: "he observed times, and used enchantments, and used witchcraft, and dealt with a familiar spirit, and with wizards."³ And, sorer still, he was a murderer, and shed more innocent blood than any of his predecessors. Nor was he satisfied to be wicked himself alone, for "he caused his children to pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom," and seduced the chosen generation, and "made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to do worse than the heathen."⁴

But this child of wrath was a chosen vessel, and you will notice now the divine method of bringing

¹ Ps. xlv. 15.

² Isa. lxii. 3.

³ II Chron. xxxiii. 6.

⁴ II Chron. xxxiii. 9.

him to repentance and reformation: "The Lord spake to Manasseh, and to his people: but they would not hearken. Wherefore the Lord brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon. And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed unto Him, and He was entreated of him, and heard his supplication and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord He was God."¹

In the same rough but right way the Lord often deals with His people now, not willingly but necessarily. When they wander far from Him, and set up idols in their hearts, and love the creature more than the Creator, by His kind providences He calls them to return from their backslidings, but they will not hear; He calls again, but they give no heed. At last He is constrained to send some great calamity to bring them to Himself: their household gods are taken away one after another; "Their strength, the joy of their glory, the desire of their eyes, and that whereupon they have set their minds, their sons and their daughters,"² and sometimes the last and dearest idol of their home, must needs be laid in the grave before they will give their hearts to God.

Many of the saints were born and brought into the kingdom through much tribulation: "I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction."³ Before the inva-

¹ II Chron. xxxiii. 10-13. ² Ezek. xxiv. 25. ³ Isa. xlviii. 10.

sion of his country by Napoleon, the then reigning emperor of Russia was not a religious man, because his mind was darkened; but the burning of Moscow illuminated his soul at last. From that moment, he learned to know God; from that moment, he became another man, and taking off his crown he laid it at the feet of Jesus. And when we are convinced that this is the chief end of any sorrow that may come upon us, the blessed trouble ought not to be called by that black name.

“The thorn ’tis painful but pleasant to me,

’Tis the message of mercy, it leads me to thee.”

It makes no matter in what form the affliction comes, it is either “our school-master to bring us unto Christ,”¹ like the law of God; or else, like the love of God, it is our Sabbath-school teacher to bring us nearer to Christ. Our health may be sore broken, our riches may spread their unclipped wings and fly away, the floods of ungodly men may make us afraid; and when we are sinking down “in the lowest pit, in the darkness, in the deeps,”² to whom shall we go, but to Jesus, who is the same tender-hearted, sympathizing Son of man as when He dwelt among us: “For we have not a High Priest which can not be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”³

We not only learn to pray in the time of trouble,

¹ Gal. iii. 24.

² Ps. lxxxviii. 6.

³ Heb. iv. 15, 16.

but we learn how to pray. In offering up our desires unto God, we should be very particular. Our prayers are often altogether too general. They scatter widely over the whole world, and are powerless because they are pointless. Our arrows may be taken from God's own quiver, and feathered with the strongest faith; but when we bend the bow, if we take no sure and certain aim, they will do little or no execution. As soon as the thorn began to pierce Paul, he began to pray for its removal, and he prayed for it in the most particular manner: "For this thing I besought the Lord."

When we are suffering affliction, it is not sufficient merely to make mention of it at the mercy-seat; it should be the burden of the message, and we ought to spread it out before the Lord in all its length and breadth. We should tell the Saviour when it came, how it came, how it feels, and all about it. "For this thing" we should pray, being assured that when we go to the throne of grace on a special errand, we shall never come away empty.

If you were sick, you could hardly expect any help from your physician by telling him that you were not very well, and then neglecting or refusing to give the symptoms of your disease. And this is one great reason why so many go in vain to the great Physician, they do not tell Him all about the hurt in the heart, and they get no heavenly balm to heal the bleeding wound. When Abraham learned that the son of the bondwoman was not the son of promise, he prayed for him by name, saying, in sorrow's own

old vernacular of anguish: "O that Ishmael might live before thee!"¹ And the Lord heard him and blessed Ishmael. When Peter was cast into prison and appointed unto death, the members of the mother church met together at Mark's mother's house and prayed "unto God for him";² and before they separated, he stood knocking at the door, and when they saw him, they were astonished. And, dearly beloved, if you are in any trouble just take it all to Jesus, and tell Him all about it, and you will be surprised to see how soon He will come to your relief; and the bones that are broken will begin to rejoice: "This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles."³

We learn also that there should be a limit to our supplications. We may pray often, but not always, for the removal of our sorrows. The Master prayed three times that the cup might pass, and then ceased; and the apostle prayed three times that the thorn might depart, and then ceased. This does not prove that we should be limited to the same number of petitions when praying for the removal of affliction. Nevertheless, it does prove something; and when it becomes plain that our calamities are abiding, we ought straightway to submit to the will of our heavenly Father, who is too wise to err in any of His dealings, and too good to be unkind to any of His children. When Jesus knew that it was not possible for the cup to pass from Him, with love to God He held it fast, and with love to man He drank it all.

¹ Gen. xvii. 18.² Acts xii. 5.³ Ps. xxxiv. 6.

And when Paul discovered that the thorn must needs abide with him always, he more than acquiesced in his infirmity.

Though there may not come to us a messenger from heaven, nor a message from the mercy-seat, to inform us that our calamities are permanent, there are other ways in which we may learn this fact. And when we are thoroughly convinced that our sorrows must remain with us, it would be positively wicked to weary the throne of grace any more for their removal. While his child was yet alive, David prayed for his recovery: he prayed that his child might be spared, though he knew that he must "surely die."¹ But when at last the loved one fell asleep, the king cheerfully submitted to the will of his heavenly Father.

And believing that such overwhelming afflictions are as consistent with the divine paternity as with the divine sovereignty, parents should have a care neither to murmur nor to mourn immoderately when their little children are taken away, lest haply they be found "even to fight against God,"² and against themselves as well; for soon or late, "as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers,"³ who runneth "upon the thick bosses of His bucklers."⁴

In England, a minister was praying at the bedside of a sick child, and after asking earnestly for its recovery, he went on to say: "But, if thou hast otherwise ordained, and hast purposed to take this child

¹ II Sam. xii. 14.

² Acts v. 39.

³ Rev. ii. 27.

⁴ Job xv. 26.

away—" "O no," interrupted the mother, "never; O don't say so, I can not have it;" and after this manner, more than once, during the prayer, she protested against the sovereign will of God. The minister was much grieved at this want of submission to God's most holy will. He and that mother both lived to see that child perish on the gallows by the hand of the hangman, at the age of twenty-five: "Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as if the staff should lift up itself as if it were no wood."¹

The answer that Paul received to his repeated prayer, concerning the thorn, is worthy of special remark and everlasting remembrance: "He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." It makes no matter in what way this sweet saying came down from heaven, it came; it came from the kind and mighty Jesus: "He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee." This was the answer to the apostle's earnest and repeated prayer; but it was not the answer that he desired and expected. His request was not granted in the precise form in which it was presented.

There are many ways in which prayer is answered. Often the answer comes down according to our asking, and we receive the very blessing that we seek. After Samuel was born, his mother said, "For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my peti-

¹ Isa. x. 15.

tion which I asked of Him."¹ We receive not only according to our asking, but "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think."² Hannah prayed for one child, and God gave her six; for she had three sons beside Samuel and two daughters.

Not unfrequently, we find no relief in prayer, and are tempted to think that our request has been denied; but it only seems to be denied, because the answer is delayed. When the poor broken-hearted Syro-Phenician woman came to Jesus, and prayed for her dear little daughter, "He answered her not a word,"³ and His silence seemed very severe. But when the disciples interceded for her, His answer to them seemed severer still, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." This might have closed the door of hope, but her strong faith prompted her to believe that the good Master could be persuaded to go beyond His commission, just once; and so she prayed on, saying, "Lord, help me." But He said to her, "It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to dogs." And melting these cold words of contempt, that seemed like drawn swords, in the fire of maternal love, she speedily forged them into an argument that Christ could only answer by giving her all the desire of her heart: "Truth, Lord; yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour."⁴

¹ I Sam. i. 27. ² Eph. iii. 20. ³ Mat. xv. 24. ⁴ Mat. xv. 27, 28.

And then again, without waiting, we receive an answer to our prayers in peace. Sometimes the asking is anticipated by the answer, and the needed supply is on the way before the want is quite expressed: "For thou preventest him with the blessings of goodness."¹ The door of mercy flies wide open at the first and faintest knock of faith; and while the petition is going up to heaven on one wire of our spiritual telegraph, the answer is coming down on the other, swifter than the swiftest flash of lightning: "It shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear."²

But, perhaps, in most cases the answer is neither anticipated nor delayed; it is only different from the expressed desire. We ask for health, and sickness comes upon us; we ask for prosperity, and adversity gathers round us. We ask that we may be delivered from some great sorrow, and we receive strength to endure it. This was Paul's case precisely. He prayed that the thorn might depart from him, and Jesus said, "My grace is sufficient for thee." And this answer was better every way than the one that he expected; that so where grief abounded, grace might much more abound. The grace of the Lord Jesus was of unspeakable value to the apostle after he came from heaven. Had the thorn been taken away, his spiritual pride, "the sin which doth so easily beset,"³ would have come back upon him with the strength of seven devils; and now, the tether that kept him down having been broken, he would have

¹ Ps. xxi. 3.² Isa. lrv. 24.³ Heb. xii. 1.

bounded away up out of sight, like an inflated balloon on the wings of a whirlwind. The Master knew best what was best for His leal-hearted servant. He saw that what he wanted was not for his own good, so instead of granting his request literally, and taking away the thorn, He gave him grace to balance and to bear it.

From which we learn that our prayers are answered often when we think they are not. We will suppose that you are in great affliction. Your dearest child is sick. Morning, noon, and night, you pray for his recovery; yet all the while his cheeks grow paler, his pulse beats feebler, and every symptom waxes worse and worse. There seems to be no answer. Again you go to the throne of grace, saying, with strong crying and tears, "How long, O Lord, how long? O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down!" And while you are pleading at the mercy-seat, you are called to come quickly and see the loved one vanish from your view. There was no answer to your many supplications; you thought so; you said so: "When I cry and shout, He shutteth out my prayer."¹ But yet, after all, it was not so. There was an answer to your every petition, and I trust you will permit me to tell you how the answer came while you were yet on your knees.

Your heavenly Father saw what you could not see: that it was best for His glory, and your good, and the good of your child, that your prayer should not be answered according to the asking, and He made

¹ Lam. iii. 8.

answer to correspond with your wants rather than with your wishes. When the child was taken sick, you thought that he might die; and that painful per-adventure pierced through your soul like "a thorn in the flesh." You believed that you could never part with such a precious treasure; that it was more than human nature could bear; that it would break your heart, and bring down your gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.

But when the blow came, how did you feel? Tell me truly, were you not disappointed at yourself: were you not perfectly resigned to the will of God, and so sweetly sustained, by His almighty grace, in your sacred sorrow, that, almost without mourning, and altogether without murmuring, you laid the dear, dead dust in the place of peaceful rest, and "departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy."¹ And how could this come to pass, except in answer to prayer? This petition went up to heaven: "My Jesus, my Jesus, spare my child, take him not away!" And this answer came down from heaven: "My grace is sufficient for thee;" and it was sufficient.

We learn, further, that a good supply of grace is the best answer to any prayer. This may be saying the same thing over again; nevertheless we can not help dwelling on it a little longer. There can be no question but that Paul was better pleased with the answer of grace, than he would have been with the answer he expected. He understood the Saviour's

¹ Mat. xxviii. 8.

meaning perfectly, that though the thorn could not be taken away he should be strengthened to endure it, and so it would be all the same, and even better than the removal of the calamity.

Let us take again the case of the mother and her child; and you may be that mother. You prayed fervently and frequently, and perhaps with insubmission, for the life of your child. Did you know what you were doing? If that loved one had lived, there might have been some evil in store for him all the days of his life; and you were praying that he might be spared to his own perpetual sorrow. He might have been more than unfortunate: he might have been exceedingly wicked; and you were praying that he might be spared to plant the sharpest thorns in your daily path and in your dying pillow: "A foolish son is the heaviness of his mother."¹ David had a thousand times more trouble with his son Absalom than he had from the death of the child for whom he prayed so earnestly.

And it is just so of other things as well as bereavement. God has often something better in store for us than the desire of our heart in prayer. We are so ignorant of ourselves, and our needs, that we know not what to pray for as we ought. The blessing that we seek might prove a consuming curse, and it would be better for us to be denied. In the wilderness, the Israelites despised the manna and desired meat; they loathed the light food, and lusted for something better than "the bread of heaven";²

¹ Prov. x. 1.

² Ps. cv. 40.

and the Lord sent them flesh to eat, for a whole month; but the plague came with the quails, and so many of the people died that the place where they were encamped became a cemetery: "He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul."¹

When your children are sick, and ask for meat, you sometimes give them medicine. It would be dangerous to let them have what they desire, and you give them what you know their condition demands. Our God is a good Physician; He is also a tender-hearted Father, and He supplies the wants rather than the wishes of His children. And since in every duty, in every difficulty, and in all our distresses He meets us with suitable, seasonable, and sufficient grace, we ought to be exceeding glad: "Awake up, my glory; awake, psaltery and harp: I myself will awake early."²

It makes no matter what the trial may be, under which we are suffering, this faithful saying, "My grace is sufficient for thee," comes down into the troubled soul, like oil on the raging sea, and immediately there is a great calm. It may be sickness, but Jesus "Himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses."³ He takes and bears them still, and ourselves as well, with both His hands; for when prostrated on the bed of languishing, "His left hand is under my head, and His right hand doth embrace me."⁴ It may be adversity, but Jesus is a friend who loveth at all times,—the brother "born for ad-

¹ Ps. cvi. 15.

² Ps. lvii. 8.

³ Mat. viii. 17.

⁴ Cant. ii. 6.

versity";¹ and in the cloudy and dark day, He comes to glorify our tears of grief, and make the murky atmosphere of earth to blossom with the best music of heaven. It may be death itself; but, hush! even down here in the thickest darkness, I hear the sweetest bleatings of Messiah's sheep: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."²

Nowhere, in the word of God, are we promised more grace than we need; but everywhere, and under all circumstances, sufficient grace is promised: "My God shall supply all your need."³ The fountain of blessing is full up to the brim, and overflowing, and ever flowing; and when we are most in need, it flows all the faster, like the "streams from Lebanon";⁴ that we may have always "all sufficiency in all things";⁵ never enough and to spare, but always enough.

When Napoleon was about to cross the Alps, he wearied himself in preparing the grand army for the grand expedition. He prohibited the usual daily parade, that the soldiers might be rested; and provided for them plenty of provisions, that they might be strengthened for the perilous journey; he also purchased warm woollen garments for them, and shoes that were heavy and strong. And while the camp was all commotion in making ready for the great undertaking, their wise commander, who seemed never

¹ Prov. xvii. 17.

² Ps. xxiii. 4.

³ Phil. iv. 19.

⁴ Cant. iv. 15.

⁵ II Cor. ix. 8.

to forget any thing, sent away secretly a large quantity of extra rations, which were left here and there along the line of march; and as wearily the brave men climbed over the rocks and hills they were frequently halted and refreshed with a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread from these special storehouses along the way.

In like manner, Immanuel's army is thoroughly furnished for crossing "the mountains of Bether,"¹ betwixt this and the better country. The road is crooked and rough, and the hills of difficulty are higher and harder to climb than the Alps; but the Captain of our salvation has provided for us shoes of "iron and brass;"² and all along the wisely chosen way there are fresh supplies of all kinds of grace. There is wine and milk, and manna and meat, and all manner of needful food: "No good thing will He withhold."³ Blessed be His glorious name forever, "He maketh my feet like hinds' feet:"⁴ so sure that I shall not slip even in slippery places; and so swift that, with Himself and like Himself, I shall go "leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills."⁵

Jesus is our companion in tribulation, and takes the heaviest end of every cross that is laid upon our shoulder; and our greatest extremity is the golden opportunity for the manifestation of His almighty grace: "In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen."⁶ It was "in the fourth watch of the night,"⁷ that He

¹ Cant. ii. 17.² Deut. xxxiii. 25.³ Ps. lxxxiv. 11.⁴ Ps. xviii. 33.⁵ Cant. ii. 8.⁶ Gen. xxii. 14.⁷ Mat. xiv. 25.

went unto His despairing disciples in the storm, treading down the tempest with His feet, and, saying, so sweetly, "Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid." It was when they were drifting, and "neither sun nor stars in many days appeared,"¹ and no small tempest lay on them, and all hope that they should be saved was taken away, that He sent His angel to stand by His apostle, saying, "Fear not, Paul." Nay, more, it was when Himself had fainted and fallen on the ground in Gethsemane, and was sweating blood, that He was lifted up in the strengthening angel's arms. And knowing, by such experience, that the time of need is the set time to show Himself friendly, He hastens to our help. Our frail life-bark may be heavy-laden, and laboring with the storm, and hope may have left the helm long ago; but through the snapping cordage of the sinking ship there comes this charming cadence from beyond the sky: "My grace is sufficient for thee." It is wafted to mine ear with every rushing wind, and every rising wave. What though the man on the lookout cries, "breakers ahead?" there is another and a sweeter voice; it is the voice of my Beloved saying unto me, "My grace is sufficient for thee;" and, therefore, if not with a fair wind filling all the sails, and singing friends ahead, "having a desire to depart,"² still in the little life-boat, or on some floating fragment of the wreck, I shall reach the shining shore at last: "So He bringeth them unto their desired haven."³ So! by tasking to the utmost their strength and their seamanship, "toil-

¹ Acts xxvii. 20.² Phil. i. 23.³ Ps. cvii. 30.

ing in rowing"¹ along the coast of old carnality, where the weather never clears, and they are in jeopardy every hour; often praying like Peter, "Lord save me";² and always fearing like Paul, "Lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway."³ So! by taking the helm into His own hand, and changing their course, saying, "Let us go over unto the other side;"⁴ and almost immediately they are sailing among the spice islands of "a pure heart,"⁵ and "perfect love,"⁶ and "perfect peace;"⁷ where the air is always fragrant, and the waters are always quiet, and the skies are always clear. So! by mounting "up to heaven," and going "down again to the depths." So! by reeling to and fro, and staggering "like a drunken man." So! "some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship."⁸ "So He bringeth them unto their desired haven." "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away: and there was no more sea."⁹

"O happy harbor of God's saints!
O sweet and pleasant soil!
In thee no sorrows can be found,
No grief, no care, no toil."

Paul's determination to glory in the thorn is the last thing in the text, and it is a very wonderful thing: "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." The greatest man that God ever made,

¹ Mark vi. 48.² Mat. xiv. 30.³ I Cor. ix. 27.⁴ Luke viii. 22.⁵ Ps. xxiv. 4.⁶ I John iv. 18.⁷ Isa. xxvi. 3.⁸ Acts xxvii. 44.⁹ Rev. xxi. 1.

seems to be laboring here to find language strong enough to express the joyful feelings of his soul: gladly,—most gladly,—most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities. That piercing sorrow which brought the Saviour so near with His overshadowing presence, His sustaining power, and His comforting Spirit, was the sweetest pleasure in the world to Paul, and the brightest gem in the crown of his rejoicing. Just as soon as the messenger of Satan came to buffet him, the Lord of angels encamped round about him; and, through the darkness of grief, he saw the glory of the Lord in its “perfection of beauty;” and was “changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.”¹

And, blessed be His name, this same Jesus, who did so much for “our beloved brother Paul,”² will do as much for you and me: “For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion: in the secret of His tabernacle shall He hide me; He shall set me up upon a rock.”³ “O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together.”⁴ The disposition to rejoice in sorrow, and glory in tribulation, is doubtless the highest attainment in the divine life, and few there be that reach it. Even among the oldest and most eminent saints, there are not many who can rise high enough in holiness to say out of a broken heart: “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

I enter a house where a Christian is wasting away

¹ II Cor. iii. 18.

² Ps. xxvii. 5.

³ II Pet. iii. 15.

⁴ Ps. xxxiv. 3.

with a "pining sickness." I say to him: "How do you feel to-day, my dear brother? Are you resigned to the way in which God is leading you to Himself; and can you say, 'Thy will be done'?" There is a painful pause; something like a tear gathers in his eye; and at last he speaks, saying, so sadly, "Well, yes, I am striving to feel resigned. Life is sweet, and I would like to get better; but if I may not, I suppose I must submit, and say, 'Thy will be done.'"

I enter another dwelling, and find "an old disciple"¹ in great distress, and almost distracted. His willingness to help others over the hard times involved him deep in debt; and he has just made an assignment of his effects for the benefit of his creditors, who are compassing him about like bees, to suck the last drops of honey from the fading flowers of his fortune. His business is utterly destroyed; his home is broken up; and he is so far advanced in years, that he can never expect to gain again what he has lost; besides, his health is breaking down beneath the heavy burden he can not bear. After sitting at his side in silent sympathy for a little while, I venture to express the hope that he is feeling reconciled to the dispensation of Providence which has left him so desolate; and his reply is something like this: "I am feeling, sir, as well as can be expected. I have seen better days, and it is painful beyond all telling to come down from riches to poverty; but it was not my own fault; I could not help it, and of course I must make the best of it."

¹ Acts **xxi.** 16.

I am constrained to call at another house, which was once so sweet a home, that it seemed like the lower story of heaven; but now the windows are all darkened, and a piece of white crape is hanging at the door. In the front parlor there is a beautiful casket where the baby sleeps arrayed in "raiment of needlework;" and in the nursery there is an empty crib, beside which the father and mother are bowed down with grief too great for tears. Repeating some of the precious promises which were made for those who mourn, I ask them if they can not say with the patriarch: "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."¹ And in language, every letter of which seems such a tear as only the soul can shed, they answer after this manner: "We can say, the Lord gave, and we can say, the Lord hath taken away; but we can not say, blessed be the name of the Lord. Oh no, we can not bless the Lord for such a blow as this."

Leaving now these children of their heavenly Father, who are striving to feel resigned to His will, and make the best of it, and can not bless His name, let us go together and call upon another Christian man who has lost his property, his friends, his health, his liberty, and who is soon to lose his life. He is in prison; he is in the inner prison, so deep down under the ground that there is no day there. As we descend the stone stairs, we must have a care, lest we stumble and fall. The double darkness of night is in the dungeon; but, by the light of our lantern, we can

¹ Job i. 21.

see the poor prisoner. He is an old man; but he looks much older than he really is. He is small of stature, and thin, and pale, and sickly. There are fetters of iron on his hands, and his feet are chained to the floor; because he is under sentence of death, and the time of his departure is at hand. For your sakes, let me speak with him for a few moments.

"Brother Saul,"¹ you have had a very sorrowful life, by all accounts.

"Troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed;² as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.³ What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things."⁴

"It seems that you have had an unusual share of labor and sorrow."

"In labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, once I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own fault, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the

² II Cor. iv. 8, 9.

⁴ Phil. iii. 7, 8.

city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches."¹

"And are you not crushed with these numerous and overwhelming calamities?"

"None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.² I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then am I strong."³

"But about thirty years ago, when you were 'caught to the third heaven,' a special trouble came upon you, and has tormented you ever since. How have you been able to bear it so long?"

"Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."⁴

¹ II Cor. xi. 23-28.

² Acts xx. 24.

³ II Cor. xii. 10.

⁴ II Cor. xii. 7-9.

Let us learn, therefore, to take joyfully all our afflictions. There is a mine of fine gold, there is a bank of great wealth in our present sufferings. They are positive blessings, though they seem not so. As a part of the special providence of a wise and loving Father, they can be nothing else but blessings; blessings in disguise they may be; nevertheless they are blessings indeed, because they come from God for good; and when rightly improved they develop in us the loveliest traits of character. It is a truth which we learn alike from revelation and experience, that our sorrows are salutary and sanctifying: "When He hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold."¹ In the burning, fiery furnace, grace is beautified to glory. How joyfully then should we take our afflictions!

And yet how few there are who are able to do so. Most people mourn in affliction, many murmur, while some manifest a rebellious spirit. When he was sick, "Hezekiah wept sore;"² when he was in trouble, Jacob said, "All these things are against me;"³ when his gourd perished, "it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry;"⁴ when he went to the funeral of Jerusalem, Jeremiah wrote the Lamentations, beginning with these weeping words, "How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people!"⁵ when she was bereaved of her children, Rachel "would not be comforted;"⁶ by the rivers of Babylon, the captive Israelites hanged their harps on the willows, say-

¹ Job xxiii. 10.

² Gen. xlii. 36.

³ Lam. i. 1.

⁴ Isa. xxxviii. 3.

⁵ Jonah iv. 1.

⁶ Mat. ii. 18.

ing, to those who required of them a song: "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land"?¹

I need not say that such conduct is unbecoming in the children of the kingdom who have learned the divine philosophy of suffering. For our own sake, for the sake of others, and for Christ's sake, we ought to be still like Aaron, who "held his peace"² when he heard about the terrible death of Nadab and Abihu; we ought to be silent like David, when in some great distress he said to God, "I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it";³ we ought to be patient like Job, who cried up to heaven out of the deepest depths: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him";⁴ we ought to be happy, like the Hebrews who "took joyfully the spoiling"⁵ of their goods; we ought to be prayerful, like the disciples of the be-headed Baptist, who "took up the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus";⁶ we ought to be thankful like Paul and Silas, who "sang praises"⁷ in prison.

Such living epistles as these last are better than the best sermons. They are the strongest arguments for the truth of Christianity, and recommend our religion more than the most eloquent preachers. It was the fine saying of an ancient heathen, that "A good man struggling with adversity is a sight for the gods to look at." The same grand idea must have been in the mind of Paul when he said, "I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were

¹ Ps. cxxxvii. 4.

² Lev. x. 3.

³ Ps. xxxix. 9.

⁴ Job xiii. 15.

⁵ Heb. x. 34.

⁶ Mat. xiv. 12.

⁷ Acts xvi. 25.

appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men."¹

Dearly beloved, let us be so contented with any thing, so careful for nothing, so prayerful in every thing, so patient in sickness, so hopeful in bereavement, and so "exceeding joyful in all our tribulation,"² that we may win many to Christ by our example, and so become to some purpose "a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men."

"Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the Lord hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted."³

"Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen."⁴

¹ I Cor. iv. 9.

² II Cor. vii. 4.

³ Isa. xlix. 13.

⁴ Jude 24.

"FATHER, I know that all my life
Is portioned out for me;
And the changes that are sure to come,
I do not fear to see:
But I ask thee for a present mind
Intent on pleasing thee.

"I ask thee for a thankful love,
Through constant watching wise,
To meet the glad with joyful smiles,
And to wipe the weeping eyes,
And a heart at leisure from itself,
To soothe and sympathize.

"I would not have the restless will
That hurries to and fro,
Seeking for some great thing to do
Or secret thing to know;
I would be dealt with as a child,
And guided where to go.

"Wherever in the world I am,
In whatsoe'er estate,
I have a fellowship with hearts,
To keep and cultivate;
And a work of holy love to do,
For the Lord on whom I wait.

"I ask thee for the daily strength,
To none that ask denied;
And a mind to blend with outward life,
While keeping at thy side,
Content to fill a little space,
If thou be glorified.

"And if some things I do not ask,
In my cup of blessing be,
I would have my spirit filled the more
With grateful love to thee—
More careful than to serve thee much,
To please thee perfectly.

"There are briers besetting every path,
That call for patient care;
There is a crook in every lot,
And a need for earnest prayer,
But a lowly heart that leans on thee,
Is happy everywhere."

ANNA L. WARING.

THE HAPPY MOURNERS.

CHAPTER X.

"And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy, and did run to bring His disciples word."—MAT. xxviii. 8.

THIS text came to me as I turned away from the tomb of a departed friend; and, like a cloud of incense, it has been flitting in the firmament of my mind ever since. I was weary, and it was a word in season; I was hungry, and it was sweet to my taste; I was in "the valley of the shadow of death," and it arched all that dark place with a rainbow of radiant hope, which was pleasant to the eyes.

This precious passage of Scripture was not new to me, and yet it was new. I had read it, I know not how many times; and yet it seemed as if I had never read it at all; because the significance and sweetness of its meaning were never so manifest before: "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart."¹ It was the channel through which there came to me "Beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness";² and as there is a valley of Baca everywhere, and a goodly number of pilgrims always passing through it, I have thought that it might prove a well-spring of pleasure

¹ Jer. xv. 16.

² Isa. lxi. 3.

to some of you, and so I have taken it for my present theme.

The grave is generally regarded as a gloomy place; a place peculiarly consecrated to grief; a place of tears and trouble and great tribulation. We go there in silence, and slowly, as grief always goes. The service at the grave is more solemn than any other; and with sadness in our hearts, and on our countenances, we take the last long look at the place where the loved one is laid, and turn away weeping such tears as only the soul can shed.

But, blessed be God, the text tells us of one grave from which the mourners went away with "great joy." We need not say to you that this was the Saviour's grave, and that these happy mourners were "Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome."¹ Very early in the morning of the first Christian Sabbath, and while "it was yet dark,"² these devoted women went unto the sepulchre; they went slowly, for they were sad; they went there to weep, and they did weep; they went there bringing "sweet spices" with which they desired and expected to embalm the dead body of their dear Redeemer. As they drew near the sacred place, "They said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre? And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away."³ "For the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning,

¹ Mark xvi. 1.

² John xx. 1.

³ Mark xvi. 3.

and his raiment white as snow; and for fear of him, the keepers did shake, and became as dead men."¹

And if those Roman soldiers, who were strangers to fear, were now trembling through this very emotion, it is no wonder that these three timid, sorrowing, and unprotected women were also afraid. But when the angel of the sepulchre addressed them in these words of good cheer, they were greatly comforted: "Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for He is risen as He said. Come see the place where the Lord lay."²

The Saviour's tomb was empty; and that is the reason their sorrow was turned into joy. Their risen Redeemer had gone before them into Galilee, where they would soon see Him again, and their joy was full. "They departed quickly." Gladness goes quickly always, and can scarcely ever go quick enough: and, forgetful of their dignity, they "did run to bring His disciples word." "They departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy." Fear was mingled with their gladness; but, under the circumstances, this was natural and might have been experienced without any sorrow; and even if it could not, their joy was the prevailing emotion; for it is said of this only, that it was great.

It came too, so suddenly, so unexpectedly, and in such good measure, that it is not strange if its companion fear came with it, causing them to rejoice with trembling, but yet to rejoice with exceeding great joy. And making haste, they did run with

¹ Mat. xxviii. 2-4.

² Mat. xxviii. 5, 6.

clated feet to bring the glad tidings to the brethren, "as they mourned and wept,"¹ that their sorrow, also, might be turned into joy.

But these happy mourners at the Master's tomb are not alone in their pleasant experience. Contrary to my expectations, I have felt the same; and, doubtless, some of you have felt the same, when coming away from the graves of your departed friends.

Come then, dearly beloved, and let us gather up those crumbs of comfort which the blessed gospel has scattered around the graves of those who sleep in Jesus; and however small they may seem when taken separately, the sum of them will be strong consolation, filling our hearts with joy and gladness, as we turn away from the place where Jesus was laid, and where His angels still are sitting,—one at the head, and another at the feet of every Christian in the cemetery.

Our blessed and beloved dead shall live again. The Saviour's empty sepulchre is an eloquent preacher, and the anointed minister of sweeter comfort than even Barnabas, "the son of consolation."² It has neither speech nor language; yet its silent voice is plainly heard, in many a broken heart, saying, so positively: "Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead."³

As the resurrection of Christ was predicted, by Himself, and remembered by His enemies, it should have been expected by His friends; but, strange

¹ Mark xvi. 10.

² Acts iv. 36.

³ Isa. xxvi. 19.

to say, it does not seem to have been in all their thoughts. Even those who believed in Him with all their hearts, and loved Him, as they loved their own lives, were not looking for such an event. The desire of the women, and their preparations to complete the embalment of His broken body, is evidence enough that they were not expecting its resurrection. And, stranger still, though the third day had dawned, the first sight of the Saviour's empty sepulchre only increased their sorrow; for they supposed that it had been desecrated. The weeping words of Mary Magdalene, in which she gives the reason of her grief, are more bitter than her tears: "They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him."¹

Even the apostles, who were chosen expressly to be the witnesses of the Saviour's resurrection, were not looking for the reappearance of their Master, as they should have been, and gave no heed to the glad tidings brought by the women: "Their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not."² And when Jesus Himself appeared among them, that same evening, in the upper room, "they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit;"³ and He was obliged to appeal to them to come and prove His personal identity: "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have."⁴

¹ John xx. 13.

² Luke xxiv. 11.

³ Luke xxiv. 37.

⁴ Luke xxiv. 39.

The suggestion that the Saviour's friends were all deceived concerning the resurrection is scarcely worthy of any serious consideration, because they were persons of ordinary intelligence, and were well enough qualified to decide a matter of fact. Besides, the Saviour's appearances were frequent and familiar, and were continued for forty days; and, having so "many infallible proofs,"¹ they could not be mistaken.

Still less worthy of any serious consideration is the kindred suggestion, that they conspired together to deceive others. It is neither probable nor possible that they would suffer the loss of all things, and life itself at last, for the sake of telling a lie. Nothing but the truth of the resurrection can account for their conduct in giving their bodies so cheerfully to be beaten, to be beheaded, and to be burned for "Jesus and the resurrection."² The crucifixion and the resurrection of our Lord are the most wonderful events in the history of the world; and they are both of them equally well authenticated; and the last is the crowning glory of the first, and the spring of all our joys for this world and that which is to come: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable."³

It makes no matter how many modern Sadducees may deny the doctrine of the resurrection, nor how learnedly they may reason against it, because that which is actual is possible: "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done."⁴ If one dead

¹ Acts i. 3. ² Acts xvii. 18. ³ I Cor. xv. 19. ⁴ Eccl. i. 9.

body has been raised to life, every dead body may be raised to life; if one grave has been emptied of its tenant, every grave may be emptied of its tenant: "But every man in his own order: Christ the first fruits; afterward they that are Christ's at His coming."¹

¹ But the resurrection of Jesus is more than a pledge, it is also the pattern of the resurrection of His people. The same body that was born in Bethlehem and laid in the manger; the same body that aged Simeon took in his arms; the same body that was scourged; the same body that was pierced; the same body that was buried,—rose again: "Thomas, reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side; and be not faithless, but believing."²

So the same body which we now have, we shall have again in the resurrection. It is a well-known fact, that our mortal body is constantly changing, and yet it remains unchanged all the time. The same night in which my mother fell asleep in Jesus, she put her arms around my neck, and kissed me. She thought she embraced the same body that she rocked in the cradle forty years before, and I think so too; and yet it was not the same.

You believe—you can not help believing—that your present body is the same that it was years ago; and yet it is not the same. It is not the same in size, nor the same in substance, nor the same in appearance; and those who knew you only in the days of

¹ I Cor. xv. 23.

² John xx. 27.

your youth would be unable to recognize you now; but you have never doubted your own personal identity, and you never will, neither in this world nor in that which is to come.

We have often thought that the constant renewing of "our earthly house of this tabernacle"¹ was so ordered, that in the resurrection every man may have those particles of matter which once belonged to him, or which belonged to him at any time during his sojourn here. Every person may then have enough for himself; and if he has lived many years, he will have more than enough, and will never miss those parts of his former self which may have been taken to build the tabernacle of his neighbor.

But, fearing that we may provoke you to say, "Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge,"² we will pass, at once, from the perplexing philosophy of the resurrection, and rest our minds, and strengthen our faith, in the plain and positive declarations of the holy Scriptures. I believe all that God hath spoken about this great and glorious mystery of the resurrection of the body. I love to believe that death is dead, and that even the black ashes of the sepulchre shall one day be clothed with celestial beauty, by the mighty power of my Lord Jesus, "Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body."³

In the cloudy and dark day of bereavement, when the warmest love is spilled like water on the ground, and the living heart is buried in the grave, there

¹ II Cor. v. 1.

² Job xxxviii. 2.

³ Phil. iii. 21.

is nothing half so comforting. Weeping, mourning, and lamentation may be the portion of their cup, who are in any darkness or any doubt about the destiny of their departed friends: "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. Wherefore comfort one another with these words."¹

Meanwhile, the bodies of our beloved dead shall rest in peace. The grave is not a gloomy prison house, since Jesus has lain there; but a quiet habitation, a peaceful resting-place; and the only place of perfect rest in all the world. To the Saviour it was a place of sweet repose. All His life long, He was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."² His true body, having been made "in the likeness of sinful flesh,"³ was just as susceptible to pain as our own, and was touched with the feeling of every sinless infirmity. He suffered hunger and thirst, and was often overworked and weary, and felt the need of rest and sleep as much as we ever do. From the beginning to the end of His life upon earth, He was poorer than the poorest of His people; He was poorer than the poorest of His creatures: "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head."⁴

Besides, during the years of His public ministry

¹ I Thess. iv. 13, 14, 18.

² Rom. viii. 3.

³ Isa. liii. 3.

⁴ Mat. viii. 20.

He was persecuted; and those whom He came to bless were seeking to kill Him; and at last they accomplished their wicked design, by subjecting Him to the most tormenting cruelty that was ever devised. They bound His hands; they buffeted Him; they scourged Him; they smote Him with their hands; they crowned His head with thorns; they smote Him with a reed; He gave His "back to the smiters," and His "cheeks to them that plucked off the hair";¹ "His visage was so marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men."² They compelled Him to carry His own cross up the hill of Calvary, when He was almost too weak to walk; and, then and there, they nailed His naked body to the tree, driving the spikes through His tender hands and feet; and, in His dying, agonizing thirst, "they gave Him vinegar to drink mingled with gall."³ And after such a sorrowful life, and such a lingering, long-suffering death, the Lord of glory was doubtless glad when He reached the grave, and laid His broken body down in that borrowed, blessed bed of peaceful rest.

Like the Master, the servant is a man of sorrows, and tears may be his meat day and night without ceasing; all the way from the cradle to the coffin, he may be passing under a cloud, in which the star of hope shines but dimly, and across which the bow of promise seldom stretches; he may be the holiest saint in all the world, but this will not exempt him from much tribulation. It was the man after God's own

¹ Isa. l. 6.² Isa. lii. 14.³ Mat. xxvii. 34.

heart who said: "My life is spent with grief, and my years with sighing."¹

Our heavenly Father had one Son without sin; but He never had any son or daughter without sorrow; and the happiest man is not always happy: "Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble."² And this trouble commences early in life, and continues late. The very first cry of the new-born babe is a cry of pain, as if it feels and fears the evils of its lot, and the dark shadow of the future is already resting on its spirit. As it grows older, its sorrows increase, and the last cry, like the first, is a cry of pain, often mingled with pleasure, because the weary, weeping earth-way is coming to an end: "A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth."³

To make us pure and holy, and prepare us for heaven, we may be cast into the refining fire of a pining sickness, and kept there on the bed of languishing till life itself loses all its charms and becomes the chief calamity: "So am I made to possess months of vanity, and wearisome nights are appointed to me. When I lie down, I say, When shall I arise, and the night be gone? and I am full of tossings to and fro unto the dawning of the day. When I say, My bed shall comfort me, my couch shall ease my complaint: then thou scarest me with dreams, and terrifiest me through visions: so that my soul chooseth strangling and death rather than my life. I

¹ Ps. xxxi. 10.

² Job xiv. 1.

³ Eccl. vii. 1.

loathe it; I would not live alway: let me alone; for my days are vanity."¹

And when the last enemy comes to deliver the suffering saint out of all his distresses, there is a welcome ready for him. With gladness and rejoicing, the missionary angel lifts the loved one into the Saviour's arms, where he falls asleep as in a mother's gentle bosom: "For so He giveth His beloved sleep,"² and in their sleep He gives them sweet repose. See what a change is there! The wearied feet have reached their journey's end; the tossing arms are still; the working hands are crossed upon a peaceful breast; the restless head reposes on a painless pillow; the waking eyes are closed; and the laboring heart has ceased to beat. The features, too, have lost every expression of anxiety, and present only the appearance of perfect heavenly rest.

And when we look at such a blessed change as this, is it not joyful to know that the weary, worn-out tabernacle is taken down at last and laid away in its calm retreat. Its toils are all ended; its tears are all shed; its troubles are all past: "And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them."³ Yes, and I heard another voice from heaven saying, concerning the grave: "There the wicked cease from troubling; and there the weary be at rest."⁴

¹ Job vii. 3, 4, 13-16.

² Ps. cxxvii. 2.

³ Rev. xiv. 13.

⁴ Job iii. 17.

And, better still than all beside, every golden street of the New Jerusalem begins in the grave: "Oh that thou wouldst hide me in the grave, that thou wouldst keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldst appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man die, shall he live again? all the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come. Thou shalt call, and I will answer thee: thou wilt have a desire to the work of thine hands."¹ "Thou wilt show me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."²

The spirits of our departed Christian friends are gone to God. Just as He was expiring on the cross, Jesus said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus He gave up the ghost."³ And, though He was buried immediately, before His body was laid in Joseph's sepulchre, His soul was safe in His Father's house. And the same is true of every saint: before the body is buried in the grave, the soul has reached the realms of glory. We leave nothing in the tomb, but the earthly house; its noble inhabitant is not there, and never will be there, till the morning of the first resurrection. The house left desolate will be dissolved and return to its original dust; but the soul was never dust and never will be dust: it never dies, it can not die. It came direct from heaven, and as soon as it escapes from its shifting shelter tent, it flies away to its native land:

¹ Job xiv. 13-15.

² Ps. xvi. 11.

³ Luke xxiii. 46.

"Willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord."¹

The body is a material thing; we see it, and feel it, and follow it to the place of peace, and bury it out of sight, and mark the sacred spot with marble. But who can see or feel or follow the soul as it soars away on its immortal wings to God who gave it? And yet how natural it is for us to ask, Where has the spirit gone? It was here a while ago, but it is not here now. Where is it?

"My thoughts pursue it where it flies,
And trace its wondrous way!"

If the sons of the prophets spent "three days"² in searching for their master Elijah, after he went to heaven, and committed no sin, if the holy women spoken of in the text went unto the sepulchre looking for the body of their Saviour, and were blessed in so doing, then, surely, we may inquire reverently concerning the soul when separated from its tabernacle, saying, Where is it, and what is its experience?

In the Westminster Catechism, these questions are answered in part, in these well-chosen words: "The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory: and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection."

As believers in Christ, we are better off than we sometimes think we are, for we have two homes: one of them is in this world, the other is in the world to

¹ II Cor. v. 8.

² II Kings ii. 17.

come; one is "our earthly house of this tabernacle," the other is "a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens;"¹ and that change which we call death is an immediate transition from the one to the other; and the last is better than the first, and more to be desired. "Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: for we walk by faith; not by sight: we are confident I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord."²

When Stephen was stoned, and driven so roughly from his earthly house to his happiest home on high, he "looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,"³ and prayed, saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit;"⁴ as if he supposed that when his body "fell asleep," his soul would pass into the presence of his Saviour; and I think it did. "I sleep but my heart waketh."⁵

But by far the best evidence of the truth of this comforting thought, is found in the language of the dying Saviour, addressed to the penitent praying thief, who was dying at His side: "Verily I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise."⁶ Not

¹ II Cor. v. 1.

² "Being always confident and knowing that whilst we are in our home in the body we are away from our home in the Lord, for we walk by faith not by sight—we are still confident, and well content, rather to go from our home in the body and to come to our home in the Lord" (II Cor. v. 6, 7, 8).—DEAN ALFORD'S TRANSLATION.

³ Acts vii. 55. ⁴ Acts vii. 59. ⁵ Cant. v. 2. ⁶ Luke xxiii. 43.

after the resurrection, nor to-morrow, but, "To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise." As soon as the brutal soldiers had broken his bones, he went from the cross to the crown, and walked with Jesus into His Father's house of many mansions.

What the glory is into which the Christian is received at death, we can not tell. Paul could not, though he had seen it all. He was "caught up to the third heaven;" he went about the streets of the Lamb-lit city, and along the paths of the life-watered Paradise; he stood upon the mount of God; he saw what no mortal eyes ever saw before, the thrones and principalities and powers of heaven, and the glory of them all; and when he returned to the earth, he was perfectly silent concerning the matter for more than fourteen years; and then, when he attempted to put the glory on his parchments, he failed, of course; and the pen fell from his fingers, for the words which he heard in heaven were "not lawful for a man to utter."¹

The trouble is, that in the time to mourn, we think too much about the grave and its gloom; and too little about the gain and the glory of the departed one, who has passed into the immediate presence of Christ, and is in the enjoyment of the beatific vision. We think the loved one is lost, and laid in the grave, when he is neither lost nor lying there, but saved and sanctified and glorified and singing the new song in the new city.

Yes, I speak it to our shame, it is mainly because we are so slow of heart to believe all that our heav-

¹ II Cor. xii. 4.

only Father hath told us in His word concerning our departed Christian friends, that there is so little sweetness in the cup of bereavement. We think only of our great loss; of our desolate home; and the very "crown of life"¹ is eclipsed by the coffin, and the glory excelling grows dim in the shadow of death. We look down too much into our broken hearts, when we ought to look up to heaven at the heart which, though silent here, is bounding there with joys that may not be expressed. We fix our eyes only on the earthward side of the sepulchre, and are blinded by its blackness; but if we would look only at its heavenward side, as we should, we would be blinded with its brightness. If we could go a little way with the departing spirit; if we could cross the dark river; if we could go half way over; if we could hear the "chariot of fire and horses of fire"² coming down on the other side; if we could see the legions of angels gathering there to be its convoy home; if we could run up with joy the shining way, and see the near and distant hills of the better country, all crowned with eternal glory,—we would lay aside every sign of mourning, and wipe all our tears away; and when the dear, dead dust is buried out of sight, we would depart "from the sepulchre with fear and great joy."

A minister, whose house was situated on the west bank of a beautiful river, was called to part with one of his children, who went to reside on the other shore; and a few months afterwards, he was called to

¹ Rev. ii. 10.

² II Kings ii. 11.

part with another of his children, who went over the dark river of death to dwell in the green fields of Paradise. When the burial service was almost over, he rose up beside the coffin, and said to his friends and neighbors: "Often as I have stood on the borders of this stream, and looked over to the fair fields on the other shore, I have felt but little interest in the people or the place in full view before me. The river separates me from them, and my thoughts and affections were here. But a few months ago, one of my children moved across to the other side, and took up his residence there. Since that time, my heart has been there also. In the morning when I rise and look out toward the east, I think of my child who is over there; and again and again through the day I think of him; and the other side of the river is always in my thoughts with the child who has gone there to dwell. And now, since another of my children has crossed the river of death, and has gone to dwell on the other side of life, my heart is drawn out towards heaven, as it was never drawn before. I supposed that heaven was dear to me; that my Father was there, and my friends were there, and that I had a great interest in heaven; but I had no child there; now I have; and I never think, and never shall think of heaven, but with the memory of that dear child who is to be among its inhabitants forever: 'For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.'"

When our friends are gone, our communion is with them still. All the while that the Saviour's body was

in the grave and His soul was in heaven, He was doubtless thinking about His dear disciples; and we know, for certain, that they were thinking about Him; He was in all their thoughts and on all their tongues; for their communications were "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth."¹ And some of them were preparing "sweet spices"² for His embalmment. And, blessed be His glorious name forever, He was so anxious to come and see them personally, and comfort them, that He shortened the "three days," of His appointed sojourn in the grave, into six and thirty hours.

I believe in the communion of saints. This article of the creed is not limited; and I believe in it, in all its length and breadth and height and depth. Rowland Hill was not beside himself, when, after praying at the bedside of a departing saint, he rose from his knees, and sent his best love to the four great Johns,—John the Baptist, John the Divine, John Knox, and John Bunyan. He believed in the communion of saints; and there is something interesting in the way in which he proved the simplicity and the sincerity of his faith, by sending his best love to some of them in heaven whom he had never seen on earth.

The early Christians also believed in this precious truth; for it was their beautiful custom to observe the anniversary of the death of their departed friends, by celebrating the Lord's Supper on that day, in the consciousness of an inseparable communion and fel-

¹ Luke xxiv. 19.

² Mark xvi. 1.

lowship with those who were gone before into the better country; an offering also was always laid on the altar in their name, as if they were still living.

The Moravian Brethren have a special "Easter morning Litany," which is used only once a year, when they commemorate the Saviour's resurrection. Very early in the morning of that day, of all the year the best, they gather together in the church; and, as it begins to dawn, led by their minister they march out into "God's acre," singing as they go. When they reach the holy ground, standing there among the graves of their departed brethren, with whom they are still united, the pastor reads the names of those who fell asleep during the last twelve months, and then the congregation of the living, in the presence of the congregation of the dead, proceed with the Easter Sunday service, believing that the two congregations but one communion make.¹

And in some of our own Reformed Churches, every time the Holy Supper is administered, first of all mention is made of the names of those who have been called to the "marriage supper of the Lamb,"² since the last communion; then the feast begins and continues, as if the absent ones were present. And who

¹ "We poor sinners pray, hear us, gracious Lord and God: and keep us in everlasting fellowship with our brethren, and with our sisters, who have entered into the joy of the Lord: also with the servants and handmaids of our church, whom thou hast called home in the past year, and with the whole church triumphant; and let us rest together in thy presence from our labors. Amen."—EXTRACT FROM THE EASTER MORNING LITANY.

² Rev. xix. 9.

can say they are not present? "Seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses."¹

We believe that our sainted friends are often present with us; we believe they are always present with us, in the house and by the way, when sleeping and waking. We have been speaking of them as if they were dead, and distant from us; but the blessed truth is, that they are neither dead, nor distant from us. They went away to come nearer to us; and they are never absent from our homes and hearts. We can not hear the sweet music of their noiseless feet; we can not see the viewless features of their familiar faces; we can not take them gently by their heavenly hands, as we would often like to do; nevertheless, they are always round about us, and have an influence over us for good. "Ye are come unto Mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better things than that of Abel."² These wonderful words are all about heaven; and among the heavenly things to which we are already come are these: "The spirits of just men made perfect and to Jesus." We are come to our friends in heaven in the same sense in which we are come to Jesus in heaven. We are come to Jesus because He is come to us, and He is

¹ Heb. xii. 1.

² Heb. xii. 22-24.

always present with us according to His parting promise: "Lo I am with you alway."¹ And so we are come to our friends in heaven, because they are come to us; and, like the Master, they will never leave us nor forsake us: and we should be pardoned for thinking sometimes that they are our guardian angels.

And not only so, but we are taught to believe that our heavenly friends are exceedingly interested in every thing on the earth pertaining to the kingdom of Christ. From the isle of Patmos the beloved disciple was permitted to look into heaven, and there he "Saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a loud voice, saying, how long, O Lord, holy and true dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?"²

And when Jehoram reigned in Judah, "There came a writing to him from Elijah the prophet,"³ reproving him and predicting the "great sickness," with which he would be smitten, for his great transgressions. But Jehoram did not reign in Judah, till after the death of Jehoshaphat his father, who was living and reigning, at the time that "Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven."⁴ The inevitable conclusion therefore is, that this letter came to the king in Jerusalem, several years after its author had gone home to his Father's house. Whether it was written by

¹ Mat. xxviii. 20.

² Rev. vi. 9, 10.

³ II Chron. xxi. 12.

⁴ II Kings ii. 11.

the prophet before or after his translation is not material to our present purpose. We admire the silence of Scripture as well as its simplicity, and would not venture any vain speculations concerning a matter which is so mysterious. The letter itself shows its author's absorbing interest in the kingdom of God upon the earth, long after he had left the earth. That majestic moral hero, who had been for so many years "The chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof,"¹ could never forget the cause which was so near and dear to him. In this respect, his writing is very like those seven letters in the book of Revelation, which our Lord Jesus sent to "the seven churches"² of Asia, by the hand of His servant John.

And, even if this writing of Elijah came from heaven, as we love to believe, it is not half so strange, nor so significant, as that the prophet himself should come from heaven, as he actually did, when Christ was transfigured. There, on the "high mountain apart,"³ we have the most beautiful illustration of the communion of saints. Moses and Elijah were there from the church in heaven; Peter and James and John were there from the church on earth; and Jesus was there, "The King in His beauty,"⁴ and He was all the theme of His earthly friends and their heavenly guests: "And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man save Jesus only."⁵

When the fishermen of the Adriatic Sea are out of sight of land in their little boats, casting in the net,

¹ II Kings ii. 12.

² Rev. i. 4.

³ Mark ix. 2.

⁴ Isa. xxxiii. 17.

⁵ Mat. xviii. 8.

their loved and loving wives come down to the beach every evening at sunset, and standing together there, they sing the first verse of some familiar hymn. Then they stop and listen, and in a moment they hear the second verse, as it is sung to the same tune by their gallant husbands far out at sea. And so they continue singing, verse about, till their evening hymn is finished; and all are happy, because they know that all is well.

And standing down here on the shores of time, we have often thought that we could hear the music of the redeemed in glory; and among them there are voices, that we almost think we know, chanting some familiar tune which comes stealing down in charming cadences from beyond the sky. Hark! we can almost hear some of the loved ones singing now, in notes that are divine: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing."¹ And our hearts should be ready to respond, most heartily, to their heavenly hosannas: "Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father; to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever."²

"Let saints below His praises sing,
With those to glory gone;
For all the servants of our King,
In heaven and earth are one."

We shall join our blessed friends again in the celes-

¹ Rev. v. 12.

² Rev. i. 5, 6.

tial country. When the Saviour was parting with His disciples, they were very sorrowful; and He comforted them with the sweet assurance that they should follow Him in a little while: "Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow me afterwards."¹ He comforted them with the sweeter assurance that He would come after them: "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."²

The grief of those who have no Saviour is very great when they go to the funeral of their friends, because they bury them in a joyless tomb, having no hope of another and a better life beyond. Death separates them forever. They part at the grave for the last time, and the last of any thing is sad. But Christians never part for the last time; and when they part at the sepulchre, it is only for a little season; as when we part in the evening to meet again the next morning. The gospel gives us a sure and certain hope, not only of the immortality of the soul, but of the resurrection of the body and a happy reunion with those who are not lost, but gone before. It was pleasant to meet with them here in our father's house, with the sad parting in prospect; but it will be much more pleasant to meet them in our heavenly Father's house, where we shall be ever with one another, and ever with the Lord.

But shall friends recognize one another in the resurrection? I answer, yes; and it seems strange to

¹ John xiii. 36.

² John xiv. 2, 3.

me, that there should be any doubt or debate about this question, which is so plain that it almost answers itself. When his dear little child melted from his embrace, David said, "I shall go to him";¹ and when he fell asleep and went to him, did David know his child in heaven? I think he did. When Christ was comforting "Mary and her sister Martha" in their bereavement, He said, "Thy brother shall rise again";² and when he came up out of the grave, did those happy mourners know their only brother? I think they did. At the gate of Nain, when the Saviour raised the widow's son, the record says, "He delivered him to his mother";³ did that rejoicing mother know her only son? did she not? And when the Master Himself came forth from the sepulchre, He was still "this same Jesus"; Mary recognized His voice, Thomas proved His personal identity by the print of the nails, and all the disciples knew Him and rejoiced: "Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord."⁴

And in the likeness of His own glorious body, His saints shall rise again from the dead; and in the various ways in which they know one another now, they shall know one another hereafter. Grace strengthens the tender ties of nature, and glory will make them stronger still; and all those endearing friendships which are formed sitting at the feet of Jesus shall be everlasting: "Charity never faileth."⁵

How many pleasant family gatherings there will

¹ II Sam. xii. 23.

² John xi. 23.

³ Luke vii. 15.

⁴ John xx. 20.

⁵ I Cor. xiii. 8.

be some day soon in our heavenly Father's house of "many mansions!" Husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, shall meet again in heaven: they shall meet to part no more. In love's own country, and in the same love-built mansion, they shall meet again, and be bound together there in bonds that are better than those of angelhood. Behold, how this blessed hope makes a cordial of our sorrows! changing the bitterest wormwood into the best wine, "that goeth down sweetly, causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak."¹ See how it soothes the pain of parting; how it triumphs over death; and how it gathers like a golden halo round the grave itself, taking away its victory, and changing that gloomiest cavern of earth into the very vestibule of glory.

But we may even hope to meet our glorified friends before we get to heaven. In going to California by the Pacific Railroad, when the train reaches a certain point beyond the Rocky Mountains, the conductor passes through the cars, taking the name, the residence, and the destination of every passenger. At the next station, he gives the list to the telegraphic operator, who transmits it to the city of San Francisco; and the next day it is published in all the leading papers of the Golden State. In a little while, fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters begin to gather at the termination of the road, and some of these waiting ones are so impatient to greet their coming kindred, that they take the first outward-

¹ Cant. vii. 9.

bound train and meet them beyond the border of their better country, and with gladness and rejoicing they bring them to their own home.

Now we know for certain that there is a constant communication between this world and that which is to come. When "our father Jacob" slept at Bethel, he saw "a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven, and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it."¹ Jesus is greater than "our father Jacob," and He says, "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth."² We know, also, that the angels are our servants: "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?"³ And not only so, but when the time of our departure is at hand, some of them will be waiting to bear us away to the land of pure delight: "It came to pass that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom."⁴

And shall not the spirits of our sainted friends be as much interested in us as the stranger angels? Oh yes, they will! And if these things are so, what a glorious welcome there will be for us on the other side. God be thanked, we are on our journey home; some of us are almost there, and many of us have measured more than half our days: we have turned the summit of the Rocky Mountains; the mountains of Bether are behind us, and the express train is going faster now than ever before, because we are on

¹ Gen. xxviii. 12.

² Heb. i. 14.

³ Luke xv. 10.

⁴ Luke xvi. 22.

the down grade to the New Jerusalem, where all is so magnificent that the meanest thing is gold. But before we get there, in the border land of Beulah, where the "shining ones" do walk, we may expect to see our friends who will come to meet us and greet us with kisses, and hail us to our eternal home: "For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."¹

Such were some of my meditations, when coming away from the grave of a friend just departed. There was something splendid and sublime in the manner of his translation. One Saturday evening he returned from a long journey, and the next day, which was the Lord's day, he silently stepped into the "chariot of fire," and went away in rapture to the skies: his sudden death was sudden glory. He was an aged man; the days of the years of his pilgrimage were fourscore and fourteen years; he was "an old disciple,"² too, for he had followed the Master threescore years and ten. He was a man greatly beloved; and when I saw something floating back from the shining way he went, I prayed that his mantle might fall on me; for he was my father, and I was his Benjamin: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his."³

In many of these precious truths, so plainly expressed, some of you may have no special interest; but there is one thought suggested by the text which comes home to every heart with a power peculiarly

¹ II Pet. i. 11.

² Acts xxi. 16.

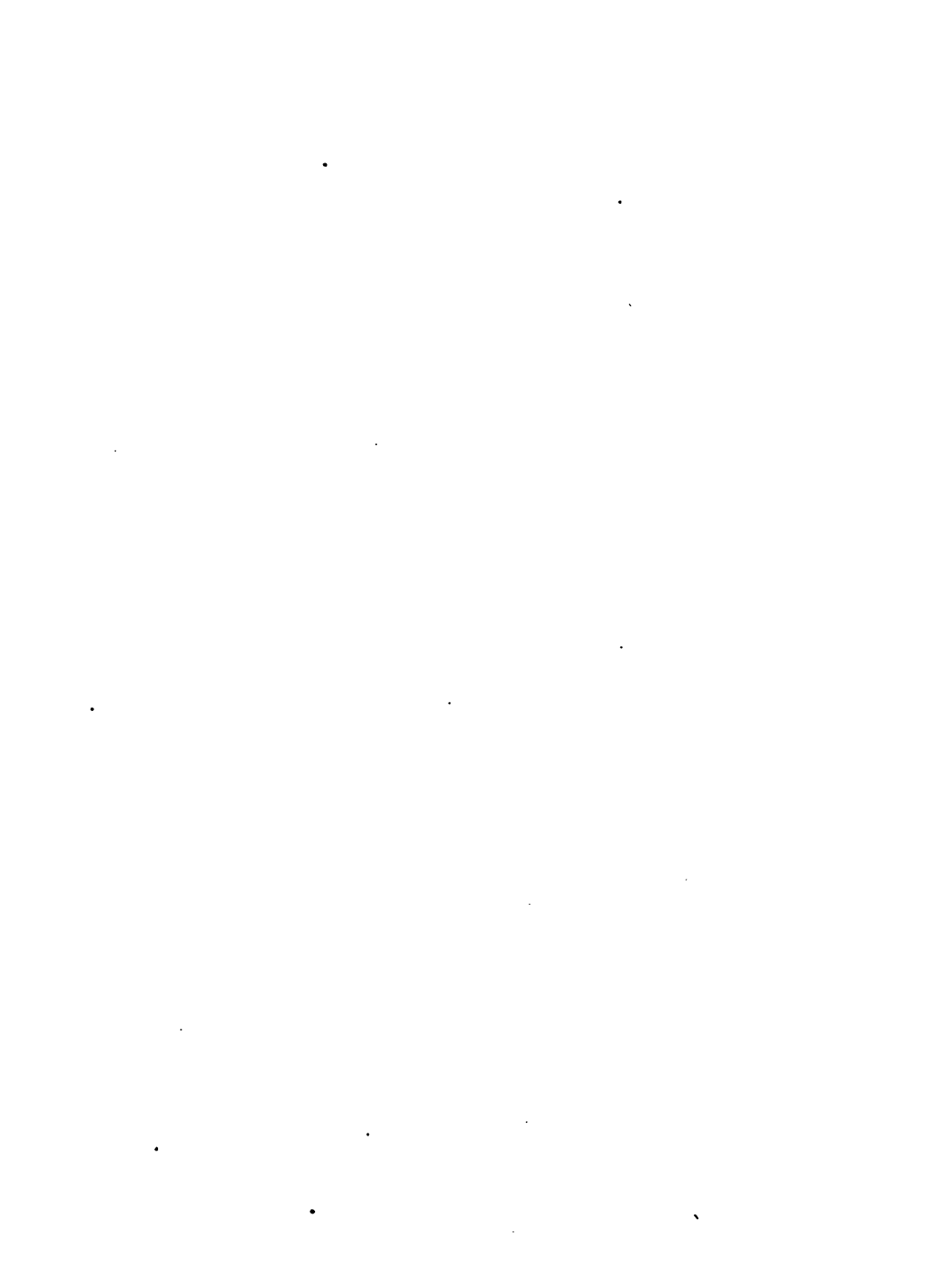
³ Num. xxiii. 10.

its own. There is "a time to die:"¹ a time for you to die, and a place for you to be buried. There will be kind arms to hold you up in the last struggle, and dear hands to close your eyes, and loving friends to follow you to the tomb. But how will they depart thence? Will there be any thing in your past life, any thing in your dying experience, any thing in your future prospects, which will turn their sorrow into joy? What will they be thinking about, when they go to your funeral? and what will they be talking about? Will it be about their great loss, and your greater gain? Or will they turn away, slowly, silently, and sadly, from your grave, refusing to be comforted, because you died "having no hope."²

But, blessed be our long-suffering God for His sparing mercy, your time to die is not yet fully come, and you may "acquaint now thyself with Him, and be at peace."³ Yes, you may repent of sin; you may believe in Jesus; you may set your house in order. And, dearly beloved and longed-for, by all that is beautiful in heaven, and by all that is dreadful in hell, I beseech you to do these things, at once, with all your mind and might; and then, though you die, you shall live again; your redeemed body shall rest in the grave; your soul shall immediately pass into glory; your communion shall still continue with your friends on the earth; and they, hoping to meet you in heaven, and perhaps before they get there, will depart from your sepulchre with great joy.

¹ Eccl. iii. 2.² Eph. ii. 12.³ Job xxii. 21.

WAITING AND WORKING.



CHAPTER XI.

"Peter said unto Him, Lord, why can not I follow thee now?"

JOHN xiii. 37.

WHEN a man is drawing nigh to death, he does not so greatly care for others as for himself. The thoughts of his mind are mainly turned to his own personal preparation for the closing scene of this life, and the strange land beyond the grave to which he is going. But in regard of the man Christ Jesus, just the contrary was the case. When He was coming near to the end of His earthly journey, and the last night had darkened round Him, He cared more for His chosen friends than for Himself. He was in the upper room, and His soul was exceeding sorrowful; nor is it any wonder, for He was sitting down under the shadow of the cup of trembling, the crown of thorns, and the cursed tree; but, forgetful of Himself, He commenced at once to comfort His disciples. Strange as it may seem, the same night in which Jesus was betrayed, He was more concerned for His followers than for Himself. He prayed for them, that they might be sustained, through all their fiery trials, and kept from the evil that is in the world. Mildly, and in the most gentle manner, He communicated to them the sad tidings of His sufferings. His dreadful

death was softened down into a departure; for He spake of it, as if He was going away on a journey: "Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek me; and as I said unto the Jews, Whither I go, ye can not come; so now I say to you."¹ And not apprehending the real meaning of the Master, "Simon Peter said unto Him, Lord, whither goest thou? Jesus answered him, Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow me afterwards. Peter said unto Him, Lord, why can not I follow thee now?"² Peter was most truly and most tenderly attached to the Saviour, and greatly desired to go with Him, though he did not know exactly where the Master was going; but though it were to the grave, he declared his readiness to die with Him: "I will lay down my life for thy sake."

From this moment, the disciples must have manifested some uneasiness concerning the things that were coming to pass. Perhaps in the near future they caught glimpses of the cross, and their dear Saviour stretched upon it, and in the distant future some crosses for themselves. And what they could not see in store for themselves, their Master saw; He saw it all; the end from the beginning. He saw a sword for James, and a cross for Peter, and another cross for Andrew, Peter's brother, and Patmos for the disciple whom He loved, and who was then leaning "on His breast at supper."³ And yet, knowing the sorrows that were in store for them, He tells them plainly that they can not follow Him now. But Peter

¹ John xiii. 33.² John xiii. 36, 37.³ John xxi. 20.

wondered why not now? If I am to follow thee afterwards, "Why can not I follow thee now?"

This same question has suggested itself to the minds of more men than the apostle Peter. The young convert, who has recently put on the harness, is often impatient to quit the field of conflict, having "respect unto the recompense of the reward."¹ The Christian pilgrim, as he climbs the hill of difficulty, being weary and foot-sore, now and then leans upon the top of his staff, and lifts a wishful eye to the celestial gate. And the aged saint, who is almost there, finds himself praying sometimes like one of the Fathers, and saying, "Lord, since no man can see thy face and live, let me die that I may see thy face."

The same sorrows through which the apostles passed are in store for us: the same in kind, if not in degree; and as they multiply and still increase, we may wonder many a time why we are not permitted to go home to our "Mother dear Jerusalem." As tribulation abounds, our desire to get quit of it abounds also; and why not now? When the nest is stirred up and torn to fragments, we feel just like flying away to be at rest in heaven; and why not now? Does it give our dearest Father great delight to see His children suffering here? Does He love to keep us in the flaming furnace? Not so! our Father God takes no pleasure in our pains, and can not feed His glory on our groans. Our sorrows are His sorrows: He sympathizes with us; He is touched with a feeling of our infirmities;

¹ Heb. xi. 26.

and as we look up through our tears to the throne of His grace, our eye meets no other glance than that of tenderness and love. But, if this be so, when we are so heart-broken here, and so homesick for heaven, why not send down the "chariot of fire and horses of fire"¹ and take us home? "Lord, why can not I follow thee now?"

We propose to answer this question in part; and as we pass along gathering up some of the reasons why we can not be translated to heaven now, we trust you will be convinced that in this long waiting there is much wisdom.

And, in the beginning, we want you to notice, that we are not taken to heaven as soon as we would like to go, that there may be time enough to test our Christian experience. We cheerfully confess that a man might receive pardon and justification and sanctification the same moment, and should he die the next, there would be no doubt about his destiny. Passing "through the valley of the shadow of death,"² he might be thoroughly assured that he was sustained and comforted by the rod and the staff of the good Shepherd. His personal experience, and the witness of the Spirit, would convince him of the blessed immortality to which he was going. But while there could be no question in his own mind, as to whether it would be well with him in the world to come, there might be many doubts in the minds of those who still survive.

We have only one such case recorded in the Scriptures,—the case of the dying thief. The day of his

¹ II Kings ii. 11.

² Ps. xxiii. 4.

conversion was the day of his coronation. Christ crucified was once preached by a crucified Christ, and that same evening the Preacher and the hearer walked together in Paradise. There is this one case, that dying men need not despair. There is this one case only, that living men may not presume. The Bible, our own observation, and the observation of others, constrain us to believe that death-bed repentances are rarely, and only in exceptional instances, genuine.

Some persons have been particular enough to keep a record of such cases. One of these remarks, that of more than a hundred such conversions, which came under his own observation, the subjects of which were subsequently restored to health, only three gave evidence of true conversion. Another says, that he ministered to more than three hundred inquirers who repented in prospect of death; but when they were recovered from their sicknesses, only ten of them gave any evidence that they had been born again. Our own experience is this: having ministered to several who seemed to be hopefully converted, on what they thought might be their dying bed, when health and strength returned, we were looking for the "fruits worthy of repentance,"¹ but we found none. The last state of every one of them was worse than the first. They took their second lease of life, and spent it in turning away from that dear Friend who healed all their diseases.

And now, since these things are so, and they can

¹ Luke iii. 8.

not be denied, is it not better that we should be detained here long enough, at least, to test our religious experience? In this most important matter, we may be deceiving ourselves, and it were far better to abide here till we are undeceived, than to go into eternity with a lie in our right hand; expecting to be received up into heaven, when our own place is in hell. And not ourselves only, we may deceive others. Our friends and neighbors may think that we are Christians when we are not; and they may be contented to be as good as we are; and thus we may let our false light shine, like the wreckers, to lure poor souls down to destruction.

You remember how the children of Israel were kept wandering round about in the wilderness, and how long they wandered, and the reason of it all; it was to humble them, and prove them, and to know what was in their hearts; and when they were tried and proved, the wheat was to the chaff, as two to six hundred thousand. And God's people need proving now, as much as in the days of old; and so, sometimes we are chosen in the furnace of affliction, and tried every moment of our lives.

When you plant a tree, you may not be able to tell what kind of a tree it will be. You may not be able to tell much about it the next month, nor the next year; but you let it alone, and time will tell: "Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them."¹ When the bell-founder

¹ Mat. vii. 17, 20.

casts a bell, he does not elevate it straightway to the steeple; but, first of all, it is raised upon a little standard and tried: tried by ringing, and by blows on every side; and if a single flaw be found in it, it is cast over; and when it has been proved, and found perfect in every respect, it may be placed in the tower to call the congregation together, and to "proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."¹

The Christian is never taken to heaven till he is proved; and it is better that others, as well as himself, should be convinced of his godly sincerity. They are not all sheep who are in sheep's clothing; and what seems to be religion is sometimes the reverse: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."²

We want you to notice, in the next place, that we are not taken to heaven as soon as we would like to go, in order that by tarrying here our Christian character may be developed. Progress in the divine life is a rule to which there is no exception. When we are born into this world, we are babes, and if we would be perfect men, we must grow. In like manner, when we are born again from above, we are

¹ Lev. xxv. 10.

² Mat. vii. 21, 23.

babes in Christ, and if we would ever come "unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ,"¹ we must grow. We must have "the sincere milk of the word,"² and the sweet manna, and the strong meat, that we may grow thereby; and this growth is gradual. In the natural world there are many beautiful illustrations of this blessed truth which were intended to aid our understanding: "the earth helped the woman."³

The night does not rush into the day all at once. The morning comes before the day; it comes little by little. While it is yet dark, a single streak of light is seen shooting up above the eastern horizon, like a spike of glory. It is a messenger ray from "the bright and morning star"; what the prophet calls, "The morning spread upon the mountains";⁴ the day is dawning. Then the sun himself begins to unvail his shining face, to lighten the firmament above, and brighten the landscape below: "Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race";⁵ rising higher and higher, and shining brighter and brighter, till the perfect day is come. What a beautiful commentary we have here on that scripture which is the inspired image of the Christian life: "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day."⁶

You will see another illustration of this truth, by a glance at the seasons. The one glides gradually and gracefully into the other. The spring is only winter

¹ Eph. iv. 13.

² I Pet. ii. 2.

³ Rev. xii. 16.

⁴ Joel ii. 2.

⁵ Ps. xix. 5.

⁶ Prov. iv. 18.

melted, and when it has warmed the ground, and opened the buds, and burst all the flowers into full bloom, it passes gently over into the summer; as the youth grows into manhood. And then again, by slow degrees, the singing summer advances into autumn, which is only spring grown older; and when you look at the fields of yellow grain waving for the sickle, if only you will connect the end with the beginning, you will see the Saviour's own illustration of the thought on which we are dwelling now: "And He said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed in the ground; and should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear."¹

Such is the development of Christian character: "First the blade;" such a tiny thing that a little child could crush it. But see, it grows: it grows by day; it grows while we are sleeping; till by and by the blade is finished quite, and now the work of spring is done. "Then the ear;" and that is the work of summer. With such good help from heaven, as dewy nights, and sunny days, and copious showers of rain, the summer carries on the work which spring commenced; and in due time the ear is rounded, but not ripened. "After that the full corn in the ear;" and that is the work of autumn—to fill up and finish the ear, and make it ripe, as well as round, and ready for the reaper.

Now all this takes place in the experience of every

¹ Mark iv. 26, 27, 28.

Christian man. You never saw an ear of corn spring suddenly up out of the ground, and you never will. The first thing is the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear. You never saw a little child leaping from its mother's arms into manhood, and you never will. It is first the babe, then the youth, then the man. And such is the work of grace; and so the character of the Christian is gradually developed, until at last he is complete in Christ. Then, but not till then, will he be taken home.

And if any of you are wondering why you are not permitted to go up out of all tribulation to-day; if you are saying, like David in the Psalm, "Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest;" or like Peter in the text, "Lord, why can not I follow thee now?" I will tell you one reason why: because you are not ripe and ready to be reaped. The husbandman never puts in the sickle till the fields are white. It would be folly, for which there is no name, to fill the barn with soft, spring blades and summer ears. Only the full corn is fit for the garner. Even so, only the complete Christian is ready to be reaped. And if you are so homesick, and so exceedingly anxious to be gone, you ought to be more diligent in getting ready to go. "Ye are God's husbandry,"¹ and it is your present business to "grow in grace"² and have "your fruit unto holiness;"³ and "when the fruit is brought forth, immediately He putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come."⁴

¹ I Cor. iii. 9.

² II Pet. iii. 18.

³ Rom. vi. 22.

⁴ Mark iv. 29.

It may be worth while to remark, further, that Christians are not permitted to follow the Saviour to heaven now, because their presence here is needed for the preservation of the world. Though wicked men do not regard it so, yet, it is a great blessing to live in a Christian land; to be a member of a Christian family; and to have Christian friends and neighbors. It is a blessing to hear the sound of the church-going bell, though it be never heeded. It is something to dwell in a city of churches, and have our houses under the shadow of their heavenward pointing spires. Property is more valuable in this or in any city, because of the Christians that are in it; and wherever they abound, life becomes more secure, an interest in the public welfare increases, and society takes on a higher, and a better character: "Happy is that people, that is in such a case: yea, happy is that people, whose God is the Lord."¹

Worldly men may be unwilling to acknowledge their great indebtedness to the presence of God's people. Perhaps they do not see it; but they might see it. Unconsciously, however, do they act it, in choosing rather godly neighbors than ungodly, and doing business with good men rather than with bad. When the merchant asked the lad what he had in his bundle, and learned that there was a Bible there, he hired him. When Jacob got tired of his father-in-law's meanness, and desired to leave his service, that he might provide for his own house also, "Laban said unto him, I pray thee, if I have found favor in

¹ Ps. cxliv. 15.

thine eyes, tarry: for I have learned by experience that the Lord hath blessed me for thy sake."¹ This heathen man saw that his worldly goods had greatly increased since Jacob's coming, and through Jacob's care, and, better still, for Jacob's sake. Contrary to the general rule, the older was blessed for the sake of the younger, the father-in-law for the sake of his son-in-law. When the flood came, the Lord saved Noah's family for Noah's sake. We have no reason to believe that Noah's wife, or his sons, or his sons' wives were righteous. The husband and father found favor in the sight of God, and for his sake, the Lord said unto him, "Come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation."²

And not only are children frequently blessed and beloved for the sake of their fathers; but, what is more, judgments and divine indignation are often withheld or averted from the wicked for the sake of the righteous. When Solomon went astray, the threatened punishment of his great transgressions was postponed till after his death, for the sake of his dear dead father: "I will surely rend the kingdom from thee, and will give it to thy servant. Notwithstanding, in thy days I will not do it for David thy father's sake; but I will rend it out of the hand of thy son."³ When Hezekiah was sick, and the holy city was beleaguered by the Assyrian army, and its fall seemed only a question of time, the good king was raised up from the bed on which he was dying, fifteen years

¹ Gen xxx. 27.² Gen. vii. 1.³ I Kings xi. 11, 12.

were added to his life, Jerusalem was defended and delivered, and the investing army was destroyed in one night, by one angel—and all “for my servant David’s sake.”¹ For the sake of Moses, the stubbornness of the covenant people was often overlooked, and the long-suffering mercy of the Lord was multiplied unto them. For the sake of ten righteous men, God would have spared the cities of the plain: “He said I will not destroy it for ten’s sake.”² And when Lot lingered, the kind angels took him by the hand, and his wife, and his daughters, “pulling them out of the fire;”³ and the Lord of angels, pointing to the city of refuge, said to him: “Haste thee, escape thither; for I can not do any thing till thou be come thither.”⁴ What wonderful words are these! The angel of the covenant, the mighty God, is speaking here, and saying to his servant, “I can not do any thing till thou be come thither.”

But this is not the only case in which the hands of Omnipotence have been bound by the presence of His people. We are bold to say, that in every age the unrighteous owe the righteous a debt of obligation which can not be reckoned up; and it is mainly because the required ten are still found in the cities of the plain, that the fiery showers are suspended, and time is given the impenitent to escape the impending doom.

There are some infidels who are sensible men, and help to support our religion for the sake of its tem-

¹ II Kings xx. 6.

² Gen. xviii. 32.

³ Jude 23.

⁴ Gen. xix. 22.

poral blessings. There are others who are so blinded by the god of this world that they can not see any good resulting from the glorious gospel; and groping about, like Samson, for the pillars of our house, which is from heaven, they would pull down the building of God, and so bring swift destruction on themselves.

The saints are "the light of the world";¹ and like the blotting out of the sun to material things would be their extinction to all moral life. The saints are "the salt of the earth";² and are kept here for its preservation from putrefaction: let them all be removed, and it would soon become a festering, unclean mass; a rotten world, reeking with its own corruption, and a very stench in Jehovah's nostrils. "As a teil-tree, and as an oak, whose substance is in them, when they cast their leaves; so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof."³

It should be observed once more, that the people of God are not permitted to go home to heaven immediately, because the "restitution of all things"⁴ depends in part on their personal instrumentality. The Bible teaches us to believe that a glorious destiny is waiting for this world. Its stained and time-worn vesture is to be renewed, and glad and smiling, as when first it came fresh from its Maker's hand, it will go forth again singing among the stars. The thorns, the thistles, the trail of the serpent, and every trace of sin is to be swept clean away, "and there shall be no more curse."⁵ "Instead of the thorn shall

¹ Mat. v. 14.

² Mat. v. 13.

³ Isa. vi. 13.

⁴ Acts iii. 21.

⁵ Rev. xxii. 3.

come up the fir-tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle-tree;"¹ "and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose, it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing."²

Poverty, oppression, and suffering of every kind shall be found and felt and feared no more. In all the world there shall be none that lack; every yoke shall be broken, and all the people shall be perfectly happy: "For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all nations."³

The pestilence that walketh in darkness, and the destruction that wasteth at noonday, making every house an hospital, and every garden a graveyard, shall be banished from the globe forever: "And the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick: the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity."⁴ "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."⁵

Wars shall cease, and there shall be "abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth."⁶ The roll of the mustering drum shall never be heard in our streets, nor the sound of the bugle on the field of battle; for the harmony of the universal brotherhood shall never be broken by an appeal to arms; and all the useless slaughter weapons shall be hammered

¹ Isa. lv. 13.² Isa. xxxv. 1, 2.³ Isa. lxi. 11.⁴ Isa. xxxiii. 24.⁵ Rev. xxi. 4.⁶ Ps. lxxii. 7.

into implements of husbandry: "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."¹

A brighter sun shall shine in our sky by day, and a brighter moon by night: "Moreover the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold as the light of seven days:"² "and there shall be no night there."³ The years shall be all one pentecost; the days all one Sabbath; and the inhabitants of the earth all one family: "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."⁴ Upon every brow is to be inscribed, "holiness to the Lord;" and rising from every heart to every tongue the exulting song, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."⁵

All material agents, all worldly wisdom, every enterprise and effort now limited or inspired by time or sense, will then become ennobled, sanctified, and pointed with a holy aim and end. All thought, all emotion, every exercise of will, now so feeble and so misdirected in their energy, emerging then from film and cloud, to purer and clearer realms, will seek no sublimer theme of contemplation than "the King in His beauty,"⁶ and find no higher field of effort than in giving expression to His laws. For the hastening

¹ Isa. ii. 4.

² Isa. xxx. 26.

³ Rev. xxii. 5.

⁴ Isa. xxxv. 10.

⁵ Luke ii. 14.

⁶ Isa. xxxiii. 17.

on, elaboration, and fulfilment of this promised time, every true Christian is a worker together with Christ.

We have seen how God's people are kept here, not only for their own proving, but for their own development and perfection in holiness; and rising from personal considerations to those that concern a world, we have seen them, also, the conservators of society, and the averters of divine indignation from the wicked. We behold them now fulfilling a more glorious mission, and abiding here not merely as passive means to keep the world from waxing worse, but as active, consecrated, and efficient instruments to make it better.

Earnest effort finds in this grand object a field broad enough for all its energy; high intellect, an aim worthy of all its faculties; and the longing heart, a satisfaction for its holiest desires. It is the sublime purpose of the Christian's life and labor, as it will be the glory of his waiting, to make this bad world better, and help to bring it, like a weary, long-tossed vessel, freighted with its wealth of immortal souls, all safely home to heaven.

Full well we know that storms and angry waves, and the lightning's glare must lie between; but the end is peace, and the haven to be reached a quiet water locked in by the blessed and the better land. Was it not a cowardly thing for the crew of the ship that was bearing Paul a prisoner to Rome, to let down the life-boat, intending to steal away to shore? Above all others, their presence was needed. Had the prisoners or passengers escaped, it would have

mattered little; but the sailors were indispensable to the working of the ship. The saints are the shipmen of the world. And shall they, fearful of the rocks and wishing for the day, be permitted to escape to heaven? Who then would be saved in the world-wreck that would follow? Rather should they be contented bravely to abide their time, so long as there is any hope to save all those who sail with them.

In the restoration of the world to God, we have spoken of His people remaining here as the agents for the work. An office and an aim so glorious imply continuous life-long effort, and a patient faith enduring to the end. It is, indeed, the nature of truth to be the stern antagonist of error, and of Christian principle to wage holy war with sin, whenever and wherever they meet; but living tongues must wing the words through which error wounded dies, and living men put on and wear the Christian panoply, if ever the final victory over sin be gained.

Not saints in heaven, but Christians here on earth, are to decide the battle. The church, the sacramental host, is the army of occupation. Her every banner flings out its royal declaration, "The earth is the Lord's;" and the throbbing purpose of every heart and life is to make this practically and universally true. Every day her converts are being multiplied and her advance reported. But the conquest is not yet complete, and so long as the sound of conflict stirs the air, or the front of the enemy looms up so bold and threatening as now, who of us so base as to

ask relief from duty, or turn his back upon the foe? No matter how the battle may go, we ought to endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ. We may be beaten for the time being. The world and the wicked one may be too many and too strong for us; but though we fall we shall conquer if we are fighting when we fall.

At the battle of Waterloo, the "old guard," the tried veterans of many a well-fought field, the pride and hope of the French army, had made their last charge in vain. The little remnant that survived the shock, although they saw the day was gone, disdained to fly, and would not yield. "The old guard dies," they said, "but never surrenders;" and closing up their thinned and broken ranks, they pressed to death, with the same firm front with which a hundred times before they had moved to victory.

Such is the soldier spirit that is wanted in the church, that the world may be conquered for Christ, and given to Him for His inheritance. And there never was a time when Christians were so much needed as now. Whether we look to the north or south or east or west, the fields are white already for the harvest. Every wave that breaks upon our Atlantic or Pacific coast is a cry, like that which Paul heard in a vision of the night, saying, "Come over into Macedonia and help us."¹

There are voices from India and China and Asia and Africa, and from all the islands of the sea. There are voices all around us here, that rise from our own

¹ Acts xvi. 9.

streets, and even from our very homes. Not less imploring is the cry that early youth or childhood makes, whether it comes from the nooks of vice, which our own civilized land contains, or from some distant jungle of the plain. Not less loud is the voice with which Christianity pleads for benighted man, whether it finds him in our own busy streets, bowing all his soul to mammon and all the passion idols of the day, or kneeling yonder in some dim old pagan temple before a painted god.

And now, dearly beloved, since there is so much for you to do, in making this bad world better, ought you not to be willing to wait patiently, and work diligently, while you wait, bearing "the burden and heat of the day?"¹ You may be heavy laden with labor and sorrow; but when weary in well-doing, and impatient for the rest and the reward, let me ask you to take Paul for your pattern, when he said: "I am in a strait betwixt two."² The balance is poised between the two worlds—earth and heaven. At first it seems to go down on heaven's side, and it does: "having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better." But, see! see! it comes bounding back again, like the scale on which some light weight has suddenly fallen, and the glory excelling is found wanting in comparison of labor for Christ! "Nevertheless"—what a noble nevertheless!—"Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you." And in all the history of this world, there is nothing so grand, there is nothing so glorious, there is nothing

¹ Mat. xx. 12.

² Phil. i. 23.

so Godlike, as that hard-working, heart-broken, and homesick man with his tired feet on the threshold, and his trembling hand on the door of heaven, letting go and turning away to fling himself into the thickest of the fight, to "spend and be spent"¹ in his Master's service.

Toil on, then, O new-born soul, impatient for thy joy! each day adds strength to holy purpose; gives growth to grace, and helps to round thy early promise into rich and ripe development.

Toil on, O weary, way-worn sufferer! bear up, O crushed and sorrowing heart! thy bed of pain, thy silent heroism, thy patient Christian walk, thy resignation, and thy grief, glow all unconsciously to thee with winning radiance, and fill the world with life's sweetest fragrance—as bruised flowers with perfume do the air.

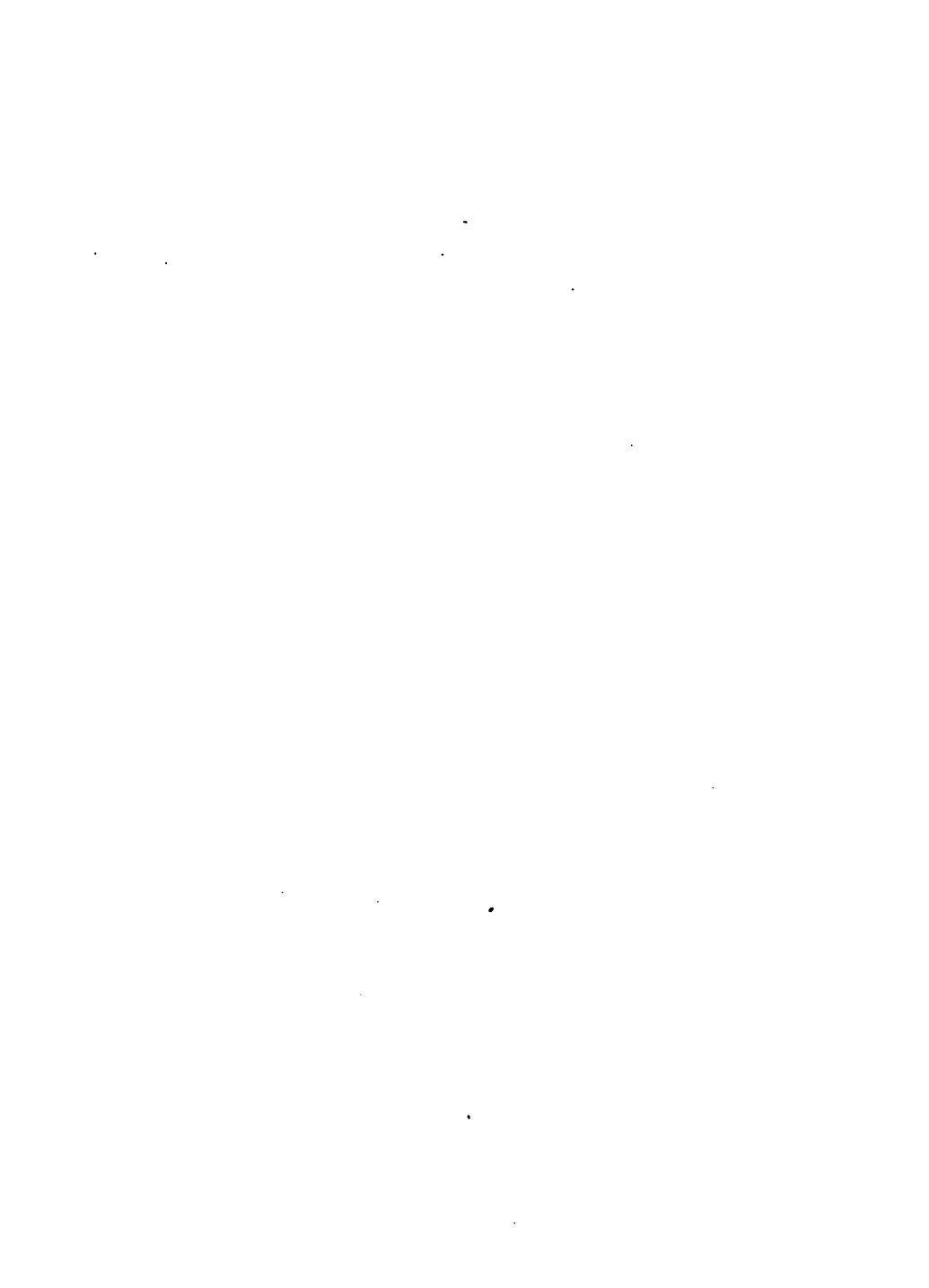
O sailor saint, leave not the ship amid the storm! O soldier saint, stay not thy hand till the going down of the sun! Yet a little longer, and the peaceful shore will rise above the troubled waters. Yet a little longer, and the battle will be ended. Then, sinking on the field, and knowing that the sound that rusheth by is the sound of victory, you can dying say again like Paul: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing."²

¹ II Cor. xii. 15.

² II Tim. iv. 7, 8.

O LORD, OUR LORD, we would not forget that we are still in the wilderness, and exposed to dangers of the wilderness. Let it please thee to hear us in the day of trouble, and keep us as the apple of thine eye, hide us under the shadow of thy wings. We will rejoice in thy salvation, and in the name of our God we will set up our banners. The name of the God of Jacob defend us, and give us the victory over all our enemies. Make us more thankful for the precious privilege of working for Jesus, and working with Jesus, and waiting for Jesus, more than they that watch for the morning. Gentlest, sweetest, kindest Saviour, grant us grace and strength every day to live and labor for the advancement of thy cause and the coming of thy kingdom; and by doing every thing in thy dear name and for thy dear glory may our hardest work become our holiest worship. Evermore make us joyful in thee; may thy statutes be our songs in the house of our pilgrimage, and in the multitude of our thoughts within us let thy comforts delight our souls. Command thy loving-kindness in the daytime, and in the night thy song shall be with us: and thus waiting and working and praying and praising we will greet thee at thy coming and cast all our crowns, in one glittering heap, at thy blessed feet, saying, Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy and for thy truth's sake.

GLORY IN TRIBULATION.



CHAPTER XII.

"And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also; knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope; and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us."—ROM. v. 3, 4, 5.

TO be able to glory in tribulation is one of the precious results of justification: "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also."¹ That is, not only have we peace with God and introduction into His favor, which causes joy in hope of future blessedness, "but we glory in tribulations also."

What the apostle affirms here, concerning himself and his fellow Christians, is abundantly proved by the history of their lives. When false witnesses were giving crushing evidence against him, and his unjust judges were gnashing on him with their teeth, Stephen was happy. The holy gladness in his heart looked out smiling through the open window of his countenance: "And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been

¹ Rom. v. 1, 2, 3.

the face of an angel;"¹ and though he was stoned to death, "he fell asleep."² When Peter and John were sorely beaten for preaching Jesus, "they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name."³ When he was securely kept in prison, and the last night of his life had come, as all supposed, Peter feared no evil; for the same night he sweetly slept "between two soldiers, bound with two chains."⁴ When they were robbed of all their property, and reduced to the most abject poverty, the poor Hebrews were rich in joy, as one of them testifies in these words: "For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance."⁵

But of all the early Christians, who gloried in tribulation, Paul appears peerless and pre-eminent. In this great attainment, as in almost every other, he stands alone and without a rival; the sublimest of the sons of men, the saintliest of the sons of God. When with Silas, his true yoke-fellow and companion in tribulation, he was cast into "the inner prison," at Philippi, and his feet were made "fast in the stocks," his heart was leaping for joy: "At midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them."⁶ When he was parting with the elders of Ephesus, in his beautifully touching farewell sermon he says: "And now, behold, I go bound in

¹ Acts vi. 15.² Acts vii. 60.³ Acts v. 41.⁴ Acts xii. 6.⁵ Heb. x. 34.⁶ Acts xvi. 25.

the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy."¹ When he came on his journey as far as Cæsarea, one of the prophets "named Agabus" took the apostle's girdle and bound his own hands and feet, and said: "Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle."² Immediately, his friends were concerned for his personal safety, and besought him with blinding tears not to go into certain danger. "Then Paul answered, What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."³ When there was given unto him the "thorn in the flesh," and sufficient grace to bear the buffetings of Satan's messenger, he seems actually at a loss to find language strong enough to express his ecstasy: "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."⁴

These first Christians were indeed "a peculiar people."⁵ "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair;

¹ Acts xx. 22, 23, 24.² Acts xxi. 11.³ Acts xxi. 13.⁴ II Cor. xii. 9, 10.⁵ I Pet. ii. 9.

persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.”¹ They were a paradoxical people. To them pain was pleasure, loss was gain, poverty was wealth, reproach was honor, down was up, and death was life: “As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.”² They gloried in tribulations, not because of any present pleasure which these afforded, but chiefly for the “peaceable fruit of righteousness”³ which they afterwards yielded: “knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope.”

“Tribulation worketh patience.” By patience we mean that calmness of mind which suffers without murmuring, and that constancy of heart which endures without discontent. Here, and elsewhere, it is spoken of as the first ripe fruit which Christians gather from the tree of tribulation. The troubles that are exciting, annoying, and irritating to other men, are subduing, quieting, and calming to them. Those fiery trials, which toss other men’s minds into a tempest, fall upon them like oil on the fretful sea. The yoke that is galling to those who know not whose it is, nor what it is for, is easy to their neck. The disappointment that makes other men obstinate, angry, and rebellious, wakes up their joy, and gladness, and glory: “knowing that tribulation worketh patience.”

¹ II Cor. iv. 8, 9. ² II Cor. vi. 9, 10. ³ Heb. xii. 11.

Frequently they feel their need of this heavenly grace, and the black messenger who brings it to them is kindly welcomed. He may be rude in speech, and rough in manners, but he brings a blessing from above, and shall be entertained like an angel.

"Ye have heard of the patience of Job;"¹ but you never would have heard of it, if he had not been so severely tried. He was the most patient of saints, because he was the most afflicted of saints. His patience was produced by the Sabeans, the Chaldeans, and his own wife also. It was developed by the whirlwind and sickness and Satan himself. And when all was lost, and nothing but a loathsome life was left, and that was hanging on a slender thread, then his patience had her perfect work. As his calamities increased, his calmness increased; and he was more constant at the end than at the beginning of his sorrows: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."² "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience."³

"And patience, experience." Experience is a comprehensive term, and, as commonly used, it expresses that knowledge which we gain by experiment. It means trial, and includes also in its signification the results of trial, such as evidence and approbation.

It is therefore a proving experience. All are not Christians who are called by that name; and what seems to be religion is often the reverse. We may be members of the church and not members of Christ.

¹ James v. 11.

² Job xiii. 15.

³ James i. 2, 3.

Judas was a member of the church. The mere fact that we are in the fold is not conclusive evidence that we are of it. The good Shepherd, who "calletH His own sheep by name,"¹ tells us of some who are "in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."² We may have the fairest exterior, and the good opinion of all who look only on the outside; but the Omniscient One, who searches the heart, may liken us to those "whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness."³ Nay, more, we may pray fervently, and preach earnestly, and do many wonderful works; but, even these are not infallible signs of sincerity: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven."⁴

Since, then, these things are so, we need proving very much, and there is nothing like tribulation to put our piety to the test. When the rain descends, and the floods come, and the winds blow and beat upon our house, we soon find out whether it is founded on a solid rock, or on the shifting sand. When we are thrust into the crucible, and the fire is kindled and kept burning more and more, till we are melted down, the discovery is made whether we are genuine. And in anticipation of the experiment, blessed is the man who can say, with the witness of the Spirit within him: "When He hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold."⁵

¹ John x. 3.

² Mat. vii. 15.

³ Mat. xxiii. 27.

⁴ Mat. vii. 21.

⁵ Job xxiii. 10.

It is also a purifying experience. We need more than proving. We need, as well, to be separated from much that is worthless and vile; and the original meaning of tribulation, to which so much is attributed in the text, will serve to show you both the manner and the motive of our afflictions. As we generally use it, tribulation is a bitter term, and its ordinary acceptation is only anguish; but there is a hidden beauty under its dark disguise, and in its heart there is a hive of honey. It is derived from a Latin word which means to thresh. Tribulation, therefore, being interpreted, signifies the threshing of the Christian; and points out the process by which he is purified for heaven.

"Ye are God's husbandry."¹ You know what that means. You are the trees of His planting, the vines of His trimming, and the wheat of His growing; and these are some of the implements with which He cultivates His "heritage"²—the plough, the pruning-hook, and the harrow; the sickle, the flail, and the fan. Here, I see God in the ploughman going forth to plough. He breaks up the fallow ground of the heart: "The ploughers ploughed upon my back: they made long their furrows."³ And there, I see Him again in the sower going forth to sow; scattering the good seed on the soil softened by sorrow: "He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man."⁴ And yonder, once more, I see Him in the reaper going forth to reap; putting in the sickle when the harvest is

¹ I Cor. iii. 9.

² I Pet. v. 3.

³ Ps. cxxix. 3.

⁴ Mat. xiii. 37.



ripe, and coming again "with rejoicing, bringing His sheaves with Him;"¹ which sheaves we are. He casts us down, all unbound, on the barn floor of the sick-bed; and, making bare His arms, like a laboring man, and bending over us to His work, He beats us with His flail: now with His flail of weakness, and again with His flail of painfulness; now softly, and then heavily, as the case may require; intent only upon beating off and beating out the pure grain of Christian character; separating the wheat from the stalks on which it grew, and the husks in which it was hidden; and beating us, "if need be,"² through many tiresome days and "wearisome nights."³ And as we lie there "full of tossings to and fro," all the time understanding the nature and purpose of the process, we repine not, but rejoice rather, because our "Father is the husbandman,"⁴ and so He prepareth us for the heavenly garner.

It is, further, a perfecting experience. There are degrees of purity, and several successive stages in the development of the divine life; and He who hath begun a good work in us will carry it on to completion. He will perfect that which concerneth us, and sanctify us wholly, that He may present us "faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy,"⁵ "not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing."⁶ And, in order to make His work quite perfect, the heavenly husbandman has recourse to another instru-

¹ Ps. cxxvi. 6.

² Job vii. 3.

³ Jude 24.

⁴ I Pet. i. 6.

⁵ John xv. 1.

⁶ Eph. v. 27.

ment beside the flail: "Whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor."¹

When the wheat is threshed, it is not fit for the garner. Though separated from the worthless straw, there yet remains the still more worthless chaff; and it must needs pass through another purifying process, in its progress to perfection. It must be winnowed, which was done in old time, as the word itself imports, by taking it on a large, fan-shaped shovel, and throwing it up across the wind. To facilitate the fanning, the threshing-floor was generally located on high ground, and was always constructed in the form of a circle, and was left open all round to the wind. As soon as the work of the flail was finished, the straw was carefully removed from the floor, and the work of the fan was commenced, and continued till all the chaff was carried away, and nothing but clean wheat was left.

So, by continued tribulation, our heavenly Father completes our sanctification. When He is done threshing, He lays aside His flail and takes us on His fan, and tosses us up and down against the wind of adversity. Up and down, not to hurt us, but to make us holy. Up and down, till He hath cleansed us "from all iniquity." And, blessed be His glorious name forever, "He doth not afflict willingly,"² never "from His heart";³ but always and only from His hand: "Whose fan is in His hand."⁴

It is all the while a pleasant experience. Strange

¹ Mat. iii. 12.

² Lam. iii. 33.

³ Lam. iii. 33 (marginal reading).

⁴ Mat. iii. 12.

as it may seem, there is light in darkness, there is joy in sorrow, and there is peace in trouble. In every shady place, the Saviour's presence is brighter than the double light of noon; in every grief, His grace is magnified beyond the purest joys of earth, and His love always causeth us to triumph over every trial. "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ."¹

The happiest persons we have ever known were those who suffered the most. The threshing-floor was their pulpit, from which they preached the sweetest sermons about "the unsearchable riches of Christ,"² and "the exceeding riches of His grace";³ it was their Pisgah, from which they saw the land of praises, and rejoiced as if they were already there, singing, in notes that are divine: "Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father: to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever."⁴

According to the geography of grace, Patmos was nearer to Paradise than the upper room in Jerusalem; and the beloved disciple was dearer to Jesus there than when he "leaned on His breast at supper."⁵

¹ II Cor. 1, 3-5.

² Eph. iii. 8.

³ Eph. ii. 7.

⁴ Rev. i. 5, 6.

⁵ John xxi. 20.

And there is a special blessing for those who read his last book which was written there, under the "shadow of heavenly things":¹ "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand."²

When Rutherford was silenced and sent into banishment for loving Jesus, and serving Him for love, he was the happiest man in all the world; and many of his "Immortal Letters" were written with joy's own ink "from Christ's Palace in Aberdeen." As soon as he was pointed out, and spoken of, as "the banished minister," he accepted the insulting epithet, and bound it like a "garland" around his head, and gloried in it. So beautiful were the ashes of reproach in his eyes, that they blossomed all over with "the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the valleys."³ And after he quitted "the tents of Kedar,"⁴ the stray arrows that he sent out from the place of his retirement were gathered together in the quiver of a book, which has held the highest place among our Christian classics for more than two hundred years, and will continue to spread abroad the sweetest fragrance of the sweetest name till the coming of the King.

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits."⁵ His blows are benefits; His blows are blessings; it is a benediction to be beaten, to be bruised, and to be broken with His heavenly flail: "Strokes from the sweet Mediator's hands are very

¹ Heb. viii. 5.

² Rev. i. 3.

³ Cant. ii. 1.

⁴ Cant. i. 5.

⁵ Ps. ciii. 2.

sweet." "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

"And experience, hope." Hope is a compound word, and expresses a complex emotion. It is best defined by the two words desire and expectation. What we long for, and what we look for, that is hope. What we earnestly covet, and are confident we shall obtain, that is hope. It is an emotion of the mind in which there is no element of evil, as we can only hope for that which is good. It is indeed a precious treasure, and better worth than all the world. When Alexander the Great was giving away estates and empires with lavish prodigality, one of his friends asked him what he reserved for himself, and he said, "Nothing but hope." And the chief secret of his success, in going on from conquering to conquer, till at last he laid the whole world at his feet, is embalmed in that sublime answer. Nothing but hope is hope and every thing. When we are poor and needy, hope is our very great possession; and when our barns are bursting out with plenty, and we have every thing that heart can wish, it is more and better than all beside.

But there is a better hope than that which is common to all mankind, and which keeps the heart of humanity from breaking. It is the Christian's hope of glory. It is born in poverty and reproach, and baptized with tears and flames. Patience and experience are its foster-parents, who nourish and cherish the goodly child with the necessary milk and meat of tribulation and anguish; and when he grows up,

he is insensible alike to the summer's heat and the winter's cold. He is a brother "born for adversity,"¹ the friend whom affliction brings to better view, like those brave ocean birds that light upon the storm-tossed ship when timorous wings are wending home. And there is a proper scripture sense in which "we are saved by hope."²

In the epistle to the Hebrews, this great grace is likened to an anchor: "Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul;"³ and the severer the storm is, the surer and more steadfast it holds us; and indeed there is no hope like hoping against hope; and, better still, it never disappoints those who have it: this "hope maketh not ashamed." Our best earthly hopes are often blasted in the bud; our fondest desires frequently fail; our long-cherished expectations are sometimes suddenly cut off; and we do not always obtain the objects on which our hearts are set. And even when we do, we are not satisfied. Our greatest expectations are our greatest disappointments; and when we grasp at their substance, it is only a shadow, and we are ashamed.

When he had fought his last battle, and won his greatest victory, and gained the whole world, the man of Macedonia was not contented, as he thought he would be. That great hope that never failed him in his wonderful career, then, for the first time, made him ashamed. "He stood and measured the earth";⁴ but it was not equal to his expectations, and he was

¹ Prov. xvii. 17.

² Rom. viii. 24.

³ Heb. vi. 19.

⁴ Hab. iii. 6.

disappointed, dissatisfied, disgusted with it, and with himself as well. What! is this the little thing that I have lived and labored for so long? Is this shadow the substance of my hope? and he wept for another world.

But the Christian's hope of future blessedness shall never fail. In our present experience, we have "the earnest of our inheritance,"¹ and the last fruits of the sweet fields beyond the swelling flood are just as sure as the first fruits which are already in our possession. Our glorious hope is not a frail thing like the spider's web; nor is it just like the sailor's strong anchor; for it is not dropped down into the troubled waters over which we are sailing; but, contrariwise, it is cast upward into the peaceful haven whither we are bound, and entering "into that within the vail,"² it is not disturbed by the storms down here. And never will it disappoint us. Never disappoint us did I say? Yes, it will; but always favorably. Our highest anticipations shall be more than realized. Our greatest expectations shall be overmatched for once. "The substance of things hoped for"³ shall far exceed our hope, and we shall never weep for another heaven. "Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost."⁴

The last clause of the text assigns the reason why our heavenly hope shall not be found delusive: "because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts

¹ Eph. i. 14.

² Heb. vi. 19.

³ Heb. xi. 1.

⁴ Rom. xv. 13.

by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." Hope, as well as faith, works by love. Love is the source of all its strength and beauty. It is also the ground out of which every other grace grows, and the grand reason why all our afflictions work together for good and for glory. Love is the root and the offspring of the same tree of tribulation. The mother and the children of the same sorrow.

Patience, experience, and hope! No children ever bore so many features of their parents as these do of love. Let me call their names. Patience is enduring love; experience is perfecting love; and hope is exulting love. And all of them are better than good, because of love; but love alone is first and last and best—before all, after all, and above all. This mother is more to be desired than all her daughters; and as David said of Goliath's sword, so say I of love: "There is none like that; give it me."¹ Let ever-living, never-dying, never-failing love be mine, and I shall never be confounded. In the cloudy and dark day when I am left alone, and in "the valley of the shadow of death,"² when every other hand must let me go, still abiding, never changing, love shall hold me fast, keep me from falling, and make even mine enemies to be at peace with me. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"³ Nay, these are but the cords of love by which we are drawn and bound more closely to Christ. Nay, more, they are His angels who have

¹ I Sam. xxi. 9.

² Ps. xxiii. 4.

³ Rom. viii. 35.

charge over us in all our ways, to bear us up in their arms: "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?"¹

Such are the several benefits of sorrow as they are delineated by the apostle, and proved also by our own experience. Being justified by faith, our afflictions are altogether altered. They are not what they seem—the frowning expressions of the divine displeasure; but, on the contrary, they are what they seem not—the beneficent manifestations of the divine love. As the thorns which pierced the Saviour's brow were twisted into the shape of a crown; so our tribulations are emblems of royalty, and "if we suffer, we shall also reign with Him."² "Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of His glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."³

Not only is there a silver lining in every flitting cloud, but, when rightly viewed, the cloud itself is brighter than the bright light that is in it. If only we could be caught up beyond the cloud, where the sun is always shining, there would be no darkness in it at all; but only dazzling brightness and rainbow hues. So, when looked at in the light of heavenly love, our lesser troubles grow beautiful, our greater ones, sublime. In the inspired inventory of our possessions, proper mention is made of them, and they are by far the best of our good things. We ought to make them welcome when they come, and entertain

¹ Heb. i. 14. ² II Tim. ii. 12. ³ Mat. xix. 28.

them kindly: "for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."¹ We ought to be aided by them rather than annoyed; and take courage from them, not cowardice; strength, not weakness; victory, not defeat. The eye quick to discern the good in the evil; the mind that can distil sweetness out of the bitter; the heart that can rebound from the heaviest blow,—these are noble, beautiful, and brave: would that they were always ours.

Before we close, come and see this stagnant pool? Its waters are foul and black and dead. Its surface is covered over with a scum of purple and yellow and green. It is the home and the hiding-place of nameless unclean and creeping things. It breathes out only an offensive odor, charging the atmosphere with positive poison; sending sickness and death far and wide on the wings of the wind. But, by the silent, unseen, and powerful influence of the sun's rays, that foul water is distilled and drawn upward to the sky, where it is gathered into bright clouds of clean and pure and holy water.

Now then for the parallel. That stagnant pool—that hiding-place of so many abominations—that mother of "the noisome pestilence,"² is the express image of ourselves. In our estate of sin and misery, we are nothing better than the filthy water of the world, corrupt and corrupting all who come within our influence. But, see! see! "The Sun of righteousness" is rising over us "with healing in his wings,"³ and by pouring down His purifying power upon us,

¹ Heb. xiii. 2.

² Ps. xci. 3.

³ Mal. iv. 2.

we are first transformed and then translated to join the "cloud of witnesses"¹—that "great multitude, which no man could number," and of whom the elder said, "These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."²

"Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do His will, working in you that which is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."³

¹ Heb. xii. 1.

² Rev. vii. 14.

³ Heb. xiii. 20.

THE FEARFUL THINGS WE FEAR.

CHAPTER XIII.

"Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer."—REV. ii. 10.

WE are so constituted by our all-wise Creator that we can not help looking forward to the future, and living much in the future. Our business, our plans, our pleasures, all have reference to the future; we think about it more than we think about the past; we think about it more than we think about the present; and not unfrequently our minds are so thoroughly occupied with things to come, that the past and the present are both quite forgotten. The real burdens which were laid on us yesterday and to-day are not half so heavy as the anticipated burden of to-morrow. The trials which we feel, and which we have felt, are light; they are less than nothing, in comparison of the trials which we fear.

In every Christian heart, the past, the present, and the future should each have its own place. We may not forget the past: "God requireth that which is past;"¹ we may not neglect the present: "Son, go work to-day in my vineyard;"² we may not ignore the future: "How wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?"³

It would be useless for us to strive to shut out the future entirely from our minds, because we can not

¹ Eccl. iii. 15.

² Mat. xxi. 28.

³ Jer. xii. 5.

do so. In spite of all our bars and bolts, it will force its way into the holiest chamber of our hearts, and become our constant guest, talking all the time, and only about the fear of fearful things.

And since we must needs give place to the future, we may do so and commit no sin; we may do so and experience no sorrow. It is not looking into the future that makes us sad, but it is the way we look. It is not thinking about the future that brings us under condemnation, but it is the manner of our thoughts. As children, and heirs of God, we should look ever on the bright side of the future, because it is the right side; and never on the dark side, because it is the wrong side. We may hope for future good, but we ought not to fear future evil: "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."¹

And yet, strange to say, it is the dark side of things to come at which some of us are always looking. We are not hoping for any good, but are fearing only evil. Our eyes are so steadfastly fixed on the burning, fiery furnace into which we may be cast, that we can not see our sympathizing Saviour "walking in the midst of the fire."² To ourselves, therefore, and to all such timorous saints, the text is a timely admonition, to which we should give the most earnest heed: "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer."

Suffering is the lot of our inheritance: "Man is born unto trouble;"³ and our few days are "full of trouble." We have trials in the present time, and

¹ Mat. vi. 34.

² Dan. iii. 25.

³ Job v. 7.

trials in prospect. This has been so from the beginning of the world, and it will be so even unto the end. Concerning the saints redeemed in glory, the question was asked, "What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?"¹ And the answer was, "These are they which came out of great tribulation." Concerning the saints on earth, it might be asked, "What are these which are arrayed in black robes? and where are they going?" And the answer could be nothing else than this, "These are they who are going through great tribulation home to God." There is no other road to heaven except "through the valley of Baca:"² "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom."³ The way to the throne is still by the thorn; the way to the crown is still by the cross; the way to glory is still through the grave.

"The path of sorrow, and that path alone,
Leads to the land where sorrow is unknown."

There are some sorrows which are personal and peculiar; there are others which are common to all mankind; and some of the things which you shall suffer may be briefly mentioned.

You shall suffer sickness. It is true that some men are seldom sick, while others never see a healthy day; but these two extremes of sickness and health are equal exceptions to the general rule; and, whatever may be your present condition, sickness in some measure, and at some time, will surely fall to your lot.

¹ Rev. vii. 13.

² Ps. lxxxiv. 6.

³ Acts xiv. 22.

There are but few persons who enjoy what is called perfect and uninterrupted health, and to these few sickness is certain to come soon or late; so that, even if you are one of these, you can not expect to be always the same healthy man you this day are. The great majority of our race are often indisposed; more than half of them die of divers diseases while they are yet young; and those who still survive are sometimes brought to the brink of the grave.

Sickness is the result of sin; but yet, it does not follow, that those who are most frequently prostrated on beds of languishing are sinners above all men; contrariwise, and strange as it may seem, they are often the best of saints. It is not in the power of personal holiness to prevent those diseases which sin has introduced into the minds and bodies of men. Of all the ancient worthies, spoken of in the Old and New Testaments, not one of them escaped the universal plague; even the two who did not die were not exempt from bodily infirmities; for Enoch and Elijah never enjoyed perfect health till they went to heaven, where "the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick."¹

Even the deepest, dearest love of our Lord Jesus is no security against sickness. The home of Bethany was a little heaven. The angels of the Lord were always encamped round about it, and the Lord of angels often lodged there. There the "Man of sorrows"² oftentimes resorted to rest awhile: His room was always ready, and He was always entertained

¹ Isa. xxxiii. 24.

² Isa. liii. 3.

with the most affectionate hospitality. Jesus loved every member of that holy family: "Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus."¹ But yet, into that holy sanctuary, where the Saviour often sought repose, and prayed, the destroying angel came: "Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick."²

And although this same Jesus may love you just as much, and give His angels charge over you in all your ways, sickness will come upon you sometime. Perhaps in the near future the wearisome days and nights will begin to dawn and darken; and your sufferings on the bed of languishing may become so great that your whole body shall be consumed, and your mind distracted: "The Lord shall give thee there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind: and thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt fear day and night, and shalt have none assurance of thy life: in the morning thou shalt say, Would God it were even! and at even thou shalt say, Would God it were morning! for the fear of thine heart wherewith thou shalt fear, and for the sight of thine eyes which thou shalt see."³

You shall suffer temptation. You have enemies enough; their "name is Legion."⁴ They are not open and honorable foes. They do not come marching down the highway in the daytime, like a brave and bannered army, with bands of music to proclaim their presence; but they come secretly, silently, and in the night season, hoping to surprise you. The

¹ John xi. 5.

² Deut. xxviii. 65-67.

³ John xi. 3.

⁴ Mark v. 9.

boldest of them, with his quiver full of arrows, will scarcely dare to make a direct attack upon you, if you have on the "whole armor of God,"¹ and are on your guard; because, in a fair fight, the weakest saint is more than a match for all the powers of darkness. And, knowing this, the angels of the devil prefer to lurk along your path, watching to spring upon you unawares. They set snares for your feet, and spread nets, and dig pitfalls, if by any means you may be taken captive; meanwhile their leader, the devil himself, "as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour."² What cunning craftiness there is here! While his own emissaries are lying in wait to open their masked batteries upon you, he himself goeth about to decoy you within reach of their guns.

The old serpent is still "more subtle than any beast of the field."³ He is wise to do evil, and for your diversities of temperament he hath divers temptations; and most skilfully adapts his assaults to your circumstances, your mental bias, your master passion. He knows your constitution, your weakness, and your sin "which doth so easily beset."⁴ Are you a lover of pleasure? He comes with a sparkling wine cup, saying, "A man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry."⁵ Are you ambitious of honor? He comes with a royal diadem, saying, "This will I give you." Are you "greedy of filthy lucre?"⁶ He counts down the

¹ Eph. vi. 11.² I Pet. v. 8.³ Gen. iii. 1.⁴ Heb. xii. 1.⁵ Eccl. viii. 15.⁶ I Tim. iii. 3.

twenty or thirty, or thousand pieces of silver, saying, "All this will I give you." He knows the best time, as well as the best way, to entice you with his wiles. He tempted Job when he was afflicted; he tempted Jesus when He was fasting; he tempted Peter when his Master was put on trial for His life. So, in the most propitious time and place, the devil will introduce himself to you: not like a lion, but like a lamb; not like the serpent he now is, but like the seraph he once was; changing his name, and concealing his real nature, by clothing himself from head to foot with the livery of heaven: "And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light."¹

You shall suffer bereavement. This is doubtless the sorest thing that you shall ever suffer. Bereavement is confessedly the heaviest blow with which the people of God can be smitten in this world; it is the blow that breaks the heart the most, and leaves it longest bleeding. To love dearly and deeply and then to part; to take sweet counsel together for many years, and then to be separated; to go to the house of God in company with a true yoke-fellow, and then to go alone; to have a friend that sticketh closer than a brother, so loyal and leal-hearted, and then to go to his funeral: how sad it is!

We could wish that it might be otherwise; but it can not be otherwise; this cup may not pass from you unless you drink it. Your family will not remain the same as it this day is; and your delightful home will not be so happy always. The cheerful song will be

¹ II Cor. xi. 14.

hushed some day, soon, perhaps, and the musical instrument will be closed, when the dear idol of your heart shall be taken sick. During the night-watches your eyes will be held waking with anxiety, and in the daytime you will disguise your sorrow, as best you can, for the sake of the loved one who is wasting away. The best skill shall exhaust all its resources, every recommended remedy shall be tried in vain, and then.—What then? Then, when life has no more stages, with weeping eyes you will gather round the dying bed, where the flower of the family shall fade; and then the undertaker will come, walking softly, speaking in a whisper, and in all things executing the duties of his office with great tenderness; and then the dark day of the funeral will come, and through your blinding tears you will take the last long look on the pale face, so beautiful even in death, and the silent lips shall receive the parting kiss; and then you shall go to the grave, and bury your living heart with the beloved dust, and return to your desolate home refusing to be comforted.

You shall suffer death. This is that one event which happeneth to all. "It is appointed unto men once to die;"¹ and from the beginning of the world until now, only two persons have escaped the divine decree, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."² And, doubtless, Enoch and Elijah are the only twain who shall escape the universal appointment, except those saints who shall be living at the time of the second advent; and unless you are one of

¹ Heb. ix. 27.

² Gen. iii. 19.

these, you must needs meet "the last enemy:"¹ not the worst, but the last enemy. It may come to pass that you shall see and feel the signs of his approach. Gray hairs, and dimness of eyes, and dulness of ears may come as his advance guard: "The keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves."² And the house itself shall begin to lean, its doors and windows, and doorposts and pillars shall be shaken with the wind; and the whole frame shall be weakened and worn out with the work and the weight of years. "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it."³

Yes, and perhaps before the time of old age shall the earthly house of this tabernacle be taken down and laid away to moulder in the grave. Not one half the human family live out half their days. Frequently the sun goes down at noon, "while it was yet day";⁴ and still more frequently "the night cometh"⁵ very early in the morning. The moment we begin to live, we begin to die; and so we are dying all the time, and no man can tell how soon the work of death may be done. Like the "weaver's shuttle,"⁶ and the "swift ships,"⁷ we are passing away; and, in a little while, the places that know us now shall know us no more forever. The theatre, to which we are always going, and in which we are always acting, will soon be closed; the last scene of the last act will

¹ I Cor. xv. 26.

² Eccl. xii. 3.

³ Eccl. xii. 7.

⁴ Jer. xv. 9.

⁵ John ix. 4.

⁶ Job vii. 6.

⁷ Job ix. 26.

soon be over and ended: "For the fashion of this world passeth away."¹

To-day you may be in what is called the prime of life: your health may be good, and you may have the prospect of many years; but you may not have as many months or weeks or days: "For in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh."² Such are some of the things which you shall suffer.

You may expect these things. You are not left in painful uncertainty concerning their coming,—you know that they will surely appear. Your times are in the hand of God, and all the things which shall befall you are written in His book. The hour, the place, the bitterness, and all the circumstances of your sickness, temptation, bereavement, and death, are determined. They were ordained for you from before the foundation of the world. The Bible teaches this blessed truth, and you believe it; and it is reasonable that you should expect those things that are in store for you.

We have spoken of your sorrows as the lot of your inheritance, and as the heir expects his estate, and patiently waits for the set time to come, when he shall enter upon his possessions; so you should look forward expecting to receive those things which were left to you by your Elder Brother, in whose last will and testament this bequest is written, "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."³

When you see your friends and neighbors inherit-

¹ I Cor. vii. 31.

² Mat. xxiv. 44.

³ John xvi. 33.

ing their portion of suffering, you should be reminded that similar afflictions are in store for you, and that sooner or later you must endure them. If they are much in your minds beforehand, they will not overtake you unawares, nor seem peculiar to your case: "Knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world."¹

But here, as everywhere else, our Lord Jesus has gone before us, "leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps."² His whole life was the expectation of suffering. He looked for Gethsemane and Calvary. In His happiest moments He thought about the cup and the cross, they were ever before Him. Even in the sweet perfume of Mary's very precious ointment there was the smell of the sepulchre: "She did it for my burial."³ Behold, how constantly and how earnestly He expected affliction: "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished."⁴

You may feel concerned about these things. In the early twilight of the first Christian Sabbath, "Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome,"⁵ went unto the sepulchre, desiring and expecting to embalm the broken body of their blessed Redeemer. As they walked and were sad, they began to think about the great stone that was rolled against the door of the tomb: "And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?"⁶

¹ I Pet. v. 9.² I Pet. ii. 21.³ Mat. xxvi. 12.⁴ Luke xii. 50.⁵ Mark xvi. 1.⁶ Mark xvi. 3.

As often as you have read this engaging incident, has the thought ever entered into your minds to blame these holy women for their anxiety? Are they not rather to be commended for their carefulness? There is such a thing, therefore, as anticipating trouble without committing any sin. There is a becoming anxiety about things to come; and indeed there may be great wickedness in refusing to feel concerned about them: "A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished."¹

There are some people so strangely constituted, and so stiffened in stoicism, that they have no care about any thing: they are "past feeling";² their conscience is "seared with a hot iron";³ their heart is harder than the hide of leviathan. They count it unmanly to manifest any emotion under any circumstances. They know, as well as others, the things which they shall suffer, but they care not at all. When thoughts of the future come into their minds, they are speedily put to flight; there is no room for them there; they are not welcome, and will not be entertained; and, not unfrequently, the kindness that would put them in mind of these things is sharply condemned. We can not find language strong enough to express our opinion of such indifference, and the Lord alone can measure its exceeding sinfulness.

When Pharaoh was commanded to let God's people go, he insultingly said: "Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice, to let Israel go? I know not

¹ Prov. xxii. 3.

² Eph. iv. 19.

³ I Tim. iv. 2.

the Lord, neither will I let Israel go."¹ His neck was like an iron sinew and his brow brass, while his heart was like the nether millstone, and only became harder in the furnace where it should have been melted. He was forewarned of the calamities that would come upon himself and his kingdom if he persisted in refusing to obey the divine behest, but yet he persevered in his stubborn way, he would not be wise. Every fresh plague found him harder to be subdued: he saw the rivers running down blood, and swarms of flies, and showers of destroying hail, and thick darkness over all the land, but they seemed to be in vain. Perhaps his majesty thought, in due time, the potsherd would prevail; but when he saw his bannered army buried in the Red Sea, he learned who the Lord was: "Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker!"²

You may prepare for these things. When the sailor sees a rainbow in the morning, he believes that a storm is coming; and he makes haste to reef home the sail, and shut down the hatch, and put the ship in proper trim to ride out the hurricane. The barometer is better to foretoken the tempest than any sign in the sky; and when it indicates foul weather, it would be the height of presumption not to prepare for its approach. So, when, in any way, we are forewarned of the sufferings which are sure to come, no time should be lost in getting ready to receive them: "Look for crosses, and while it is fair weather mend the sails of the ship."

¹ Exod. v. 2.

² Isa. xlv. 9.

This is what Noah did. "By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house."¹ He was moved with fear only, lest the flood should come before the ark was finished. But while he worked diligently, God waited patiently; He waited for one hundred and twenty years: "The long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing."²

From the destruction of the old world by water, to the destruction of the present world by fire, the transition is natural and scriptural: "As the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be."³ From the day of the deluge we look "unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat: nevertheless we, according to the promise, look for new heavens, and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness. Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of Him in peace, without spot and blameless."⁴

We may pray to be delivered from these things. "After this manner therefore pray ye: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."⁵ In all your anticipations of suffering, and in all your apprehensions of evil, "In every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God which

¹ Heb. xi. 7.

² I Pet. iii. 20.

³ Mat. xxiv. 37.

⁴ II Pet. iii. 12-14.

⁵ Mat. vi. 9, 13.

passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."¹ Your case will never be so desperate and distressing as to prevent prayer. The day of your death may have dawned, and the devil may have beguiled you to the very brink of the pit; but, by prayer and supplication, you may be delivered from death and hell: "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do."²

After they had been doomed to destruction, Abraham prayed for the guilty cities of the plain; and every one of his six petitions prevailed immediately; and, doubtless, if he had prayed more, he would have prevailed more; for he left off asking before the Lord left off answering. When Hezekiah was sick unto death, he prayed, and the Lord heard him and lengthened his life "fifteen years."³ When David was tempted, he prayed, saying, "Pull me out of the net that they have laid privily for me: for thou art my strength."⁴ When the disciples of John were bereaved of their teacher, they came, "and took up the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus."⁵

When Christ saw the cross in the cup, though prostrated to the ground by the sight, He still held it fast, but held it up to the throne of grace, and, "with strong crying and tears,"⁶ prayed: "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."⁷

Dearly beloved, all these are patterns for you, and

¹ Phil. iv. 6, 7.

² John xiv. 13.

³ II Kings xx. 6.

⁴ Ps. xxxi. 4.

⁵ Mat. xiv. 12.

⁶ Heb. v. 7.

⁷ Mat. xxvi. 39.

when troubles threaten, they should be made the subjects of special prayer. It is good to have an errand when you go to the mercy-seat. When you are sick, prayer will be the best prescription; when you are tempted, prayer will be the best shield; when you are bereaved, just go and tell Jesus; you need not wait till after the funeral, but go at once, and He will have the best sympathy ready for you. And above all, when, soon or late, you come to your Gethsemane, and the cup is put into your hand, carry it to the throne of grace, and if it may not pass away, you shall see the strengthening angel flying down from heaven to hold you in his arms, and help you to say triumphantly, "The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?"¹

These things you may do, and ought to do; but you should never be afraid of future trials, as if they could harm you: "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer."

That we may learn more perfectly the main lesson of our theme, and carry every thing to the throne of grace, come and let us go for a few moments to Peniel, that place of great renown, where the Potter and the potsherd strove together from the going down of the sun to the rising of the same, and where the potsherd prevailed. Jacob was returning home with his family and his flocks, and was expecting soon to meet with Esau, his injured, angry brother, whose wrath had now been nursed for more than twenty years. The patriarch was never before in so much

¹ John xviii. 11.

danger. The first messengers, whom he sent to Edom, had just returned, saying, "We came to thy brother Esau, and also he cometh to meet thee, and four hundred men with him. Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed."¹

Immediately he began to make ready for the great emergency. First of all, he wisely divided his people and his possessions into two bands, reasoning after this manner: "If Esau come to the one company, and smite it, then the other company which is left shall escape."² He then went boldly to the throne of grace to plead his cause, and this was the burden of his fervent prayer: "Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau: for I fear him, lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children."³ As soon as he had done praying, he sent Esau a princely present of five hundred and fifty cattle, with such kindly messages as were calculated to turn away his anger, and touch his heart into tenderness.

Having done these things, which were proper and praiseworthy, he seems to have sought a little rest; but there was no rest for him there that night. He was so troubled that he could not sleep; the thought of danger held his eyes waking, and he rose up, and sent his family over the brook Jabbok, and himself was left alone; and yet not alone, for straightway somebody closes with him, as if for a contest. How Jacob must have felt when he thought that this might be one of Esau's four hundred men, or Esau himself.

¹ Gen. xxxii. 6, 7.

² Gen. xxxii. 8.

³ Gen. xxxii. 11.

Surely he must be an enemy, for he comes so like a foe. They wrestle long, they wrestle hard, each striving for the mastery. The first watch of the night is passed away, and they are close locked in each other's arms; the second watch is over, and still the strange struggle is undecided; the third watch is ended, and they are striving as hard as ever; the fourth watch is wearing the night away, and Jacob's thigh is out of joint; but, though he is crippled, he will not be conquered: "Let me go, for the day breaketh,"¹ exclaims his antagonist. And Jacob replies, or might have replied, "Yes, the day is breaking—the most fearful day of all my life, for Esau my wronged and wrathful brother is approaching to execute the fierceness of his anger upon me for taking away his birthright, and before yon rising sun is set, I, and my wives, and my children may all be murdered; and now, in the face of such danger, and as a light above the brightness of the sun begins to dawn upon my soul, and I know thee, who thou art, my God and Saviour, how can I let thee go? Nay, nay, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me."

The conclusion of the contest is beautifully touching beyond all telling. Having received the blessing, and crowned with beauty for ashes, "Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau came;"² not with bitter enmity, but with brotherly love. His long-harbored hatred had given place to the most endearing affection: "And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed

¹ Gen. xxxii. 26.

² Gen. xxxiii. 1.

him."¹ What a delightful termination to all Jacob's anxieties and fears; and how different the result was from what he anticipated! He expected to meet a brother offended, but he met a brother reconciled; he expected to be received with blows, but he was received with kisses.

Are any of you in such a case? Are your minds filled with gloomy forebodings of the future? do you see in the distance some trial so appalling that you can not realize it, and yet so sure and certain that it is inevitable? are you almost persuaded that it is useless to pray against it; and is it hoping against hope to expect deliverance from it? Be of good cheer, be not afraid, but let your faith be strengthened, and your hope brightened with this timely message from God unto thee: "Fear not, thou worm Jacob, and ye men of Israel: I will help thee, saith the Lord, and thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. Behold, I will make thee a new sharp threshing instrument having teeth: thou shalt thresh the mountains, and beat them small, and shalt make the hills as chaff. Thou shalt fan them, and the wind shall carry them away, and the whirlwind shall scatter them: and thou shalt rejoice in the Lord, and shalt glory in the Holy One of Israel."²

¹ Gen. xxxiii. 4.

² Isa. xli. 14, 16.

BLESSED JESUS, thou art our guide to lead us in thine own right way, and our guard to defend us from every danger. Thou art our sun and our shield: our sun that never sets in the darkness of night, and our shield that never breaks in the day of battle. Let it please thee to grant us grace and glory in such good measure that we may have the best fruits of the better country before we get there. When our souls are cast down and disquieted within us, by reason of the fearful things we fear, lift up the light of thy countenance upon us, and let us hear thy voice saying unto us, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid. We are weak but thou art mighty; gird us about with thine own omnipotence and make us more than equal to the greatest emergency; for we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. Deliver us from the evil one, from every evil way and from our own evil hearts. Save us from the fear of fearful things, and let neither sickness nor temptation nor bereavement nor death have dominion over us any more. And by thy real presence make the valley of Achor so bright a door of hope that it shall be to us the very door of heaven.

THE FEAR OF FEARFUL THINGS.

CHAPTER XIV.

"Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer."—REV. ii. 10.

NOT many years ago, it became our duty, and it was just as much a pleasure, to gather the fruit from a certain apple-tree in the orchard. The tree was good, and the apples were good, though they were not very plenty, and we expected to gather all of them in a little while, never thinking that there would be more than one basketful. But we were disappointed; for when our basket was running over there seemed to be more fruit on the tree, than we had taken from it; and after we had carried home our load, we emptied the basket, and returned to the tree, and filled it again the second time; and, even then, some of the best apples were left hanging on the topmost branches, to which we could not climb.

We were reminded of this incident by what has happened to us in regard to our text. We came to it, as we went to that apple-tree; we climbed up into it, confidently expecting to gather all its precious fruit at once; but before our basket was filled, we perceived that we would have to come back again. And for this you may feel sorry, because a second sermon from the same text, on the same Sabbath, is not much



to be desired; nor would it seem strange if some of you were thinking that we tarried too long in the tree this morning,—for we did remain longer than we intended,—but, it was so good to be there, we could not come down any sooner; and surely this small transgression should be pardoned, when we did it altogether for your sakes.

We perceived that with some of you the harvest was passing and the summer was ending. We saw the gray hairs,—the white frost that had fallen on your heads,—and thinking that the coming winter might be long and cold and cheerless, it was the desire of our heart to gather some winter fruit for you; that you might have something laid by in store against the time of need. We were anticipating the season, perhaps not far distant, when sorrow would come, and you would be saying: “Comfort me with apples, for I am sick and tempted and bereaved, and the time of my departure is at hand.”

It was for this reason that we gathered for you some fruit, from the sweet apple-tree of the text, this morning. And we are coming back to gather some more for you this afternoon; and when we have filled our basket the second time, much ripe fruit will still remain beyond our reach; for our ladder is not long enough to take us all the way up into the top of this text: “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer.”

The things which you shall suffer, we have already enumerated. You may expect them; you may feel concerned about them; you may prepare for them;

you may pray to be delivered from them; but you should never fear them.

You should never fear them, because there is a limit set to them. When our way has been dark and crooked and rough, we have derived much comfort from that common proverb: "The longest road has a turning." Hope, the charmer, springs eternal in the human breast, and keeps the fainting heart from breaking.

Perhaps the desired and expected bend is near, and just beyond it the road is bright and straight and smooth: "The Lord turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends: also the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before;"¹ and in the names of his three fair daughters he commemorated God's loving-kindness, in the dawning of a brighter day, fragrant with the flowers of health and wealth, and filled with all manner of good things poured from the horn of heaven's plenty. But, turn or no turn, the longest road will have a termination. There is a limit set to your suffering time: "now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness;"² but the season will come to an end. You may have a hundred crosses to carry, but in a little while you will have only ninety and nine; and after ninety and nine little whiles, you will have none. The deepest pit in this world has a bottom; the widest sea has a shore, and all its waves and billows and waterspouts are numbered and measured and bridled: "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further; and here shall thy proud waves be stayed."³

¹ Job xlii. 10.

² I Pet. 1-6.

³ Job xxxviii. 11.

Every tear is counted, and kept as a sacred treasure in heaven: "Put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?" Even the Arctic night has a morning. After Dr. Kane had been dwelling in darkness for one hundred and forty days, the blessed light came at last; and as he eagerly climbed the crag and "nestled in the sunshine, it was like bathing in perfumed water."

So your night of sorrow may be long, but it has a limit; it may be lasting, but it can not be everlasting; it may be dark, but it will not be always dark: "For His anger endureth but a moment; in His favor is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."¹ And, better still, with some of you, "The night is far spent,"² the day is at hand: the day without the night, when you shall have fulness of joy and pleasures for evermore.

A minister was once preaching on our text; the whole verse was his theme: "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."³ An humble woman, herself in great tribulation at the time, was deeply impressed by the exact limit which the text seemed so absolutely to fix to that particular instance of Satan's power; and as she passed along the street, she was heard to say, "Blessed be God, it can not be eleven; no, it can not be eleven."

It is probable that the Master also comforted Him-

¹ Ps. xxx. 5.

² Rom. xiii. 12.

³ Rev. ii. 10.

self in the same manner, when He began to be baptized with the baptism of our sins and our sorrows: "Father, the hour is come."¹ Might not the shortness of that season have revived His fainting spirit, and renewed His failing strength? Yes, the hour is come; but I will be of good cheer, and bear it bravely, because it will soon be over. It is the hour, but only an hour, and can not be one moment more.

And perhaps the strengthening angel comforted and encouraged Jesus with the same assurance in Gethsemane. Lifting Him up tenderly from the bloody ground, and wiping away the bloody sweat from His blessed face, and helping Him to hold the cup to His quivering lips, I can almost hear him saying, "Lord of glory drink; the cup is bitter, but not bottomless. The hour is come; the hour is going; the hour is almost gone; only a few moments more, and all this agony will be over and ended forever."

With this same thought we also may comfort and encourage one another. There is much good cheer, and strong consolation, in the glorious hope that our sorrows will soon be over. The times may be hard, the bank may be broken, and there may be no work in the factory; but these things will not continue. In the days of Jeremiah, the times were hard in Canaan, and the dreadful work of war was the only work the people had to do. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, invaded the country and laid it waste everywhere. His grand army came marching over the mountains, and like a great snake, with coils

¹ John xvii. 1.

of brass and fangs of steel, began to wind itself around the walls of Jerusalem, and the fall of the holy city was only a question of time. And, sorer still, the weeping prophet was shut up in prison, and, better than any body else, he knew the terrible sufferings of the near future; but yet he had so much confidence in the divine promise, "Houses and fields and vineyards shall be possessed again in this land,"¹ that he bought a parcel of ground in "the country of Benjamin," from his cousin who came to him in the prison. Anathoth was in possession of the enemy; but Jeremiah bought the field and paid for it, and put the title deeds in an earthen vessel and laid them away for better times. And after a while the better times came; and with them came joy and gladness and great prosperity. "When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them."² And, blessed be His glorious name, "This God is our God forever and ever";³ He is "our own God,"⁴ and our "exceeding joy";⁵ and He will do greater things for us. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance and my God."⁶

In suffering you shall have sufficient grace. Grace is never given to be laid up in store, but to be laid

¹ Jer. xxxii. 15.

² Ps. cxxvi. 1, 2.

³ Ps. xlviii. 14.

⁴ Ps. lxxvii. 6.

⁵ Ps. xliii. 4.

⁶ Ps. xlii. 11.

out in service; it is given for present not for future need; and, like the talents in the parable, it may be doubled, if wisely used, and so it may be constantly increased, and made equal to any and every emergency; and where grief abounds, grace shall much more abound. If, then, you have grace enough for the present, you ought to be contented, and trustful for the future, because, "God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things may abound to every good work."¹

When trouble comes, it will be time enough to look for strength to bear it. Then, in answer to your prevailing prayer, you shall hear the Saviour saying, "My grace is sufficient for thee."² Behold, what a message from heaven this is! Every word is wonderful and full of love divine. See how it grows! Grace; my grace; my grace is sufficient; my grace is sufficient for thee. Your Almighty Friend will suit His yoke to your neck, and your neck to His yoke, and then it will be easy; He will fit His burden to your back, and your back to His burden, and then it will be light: "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able;"³ "He stayeth His rough wind in the day of the east wind."⁴ He will prepare His way for your feet, by sending the promises, like so many laboring men to repair the road, "and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain;"⁵ and He will also prepare

¹ II Cor. ix. 8.² II Cor. xii. 9.³ I Cor. x. 13.⁴ Isa. xxvii. 8.⁵ Isa. xl. 4.

your feet for His way: "Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength. He will give grace for your troubles as they come one by one; and for the blessings which they bring you shall be in love with them, and count them joy, and glory in them. "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, though some strange thing happened unto you, for ye rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that when His glory shall be revealed, you may be glad also with exceeding joy."¹

It was when John Bunyan was in prison that he thus wrote to magnify the grace which was bestowed upon him: "I never knew what it was for Christ to stand by me at all turns, and at every offer of affliction to comfort me, as I have found since I came in here. I look how fears have presented themselves, how I have had supports and encouragements. Yea, we have started even, as it were, at nothing else but the shadow, yet God, as being very tender of me, has not suffered me to be molested; but would with His Word or Scripture or another strengthen me against all. So much that I have often said, were it lawful, I would pray for greater trouble, for the greater comfort's sake."

Your Saviour will be with you in suffering. When apprehensions of evil are the swift chariots in which Jesus comes driving down from heaven, as if He could not wait; and as soon as He alights, He says to those who are of a fearful heart: "Fear not; for I have overcome the world."

¹ Deut. xxxiii. 25.

² I Pet. iv. 12, 13.

deemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour."¹

Christ was with the three heroic Hebrews in the burning fiery furnace. The cruel king of Babylon saw Him there and confessed it. With astonishment he said to his counsellors: "Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True O king. He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God."² The furnace was so exceeding hot, that the bursting flames actually burned up the soldiers who cast Shadrach, Meshach, Abed-nego into it; but they only burned off the cords with which these noble martyrs were bound that they might walk with Him who "quenched the violence of fire."³

Christ was also with Daniel in the lions' den, and preserved the life of his faithful servant. Darius, the king, was greatly distressed about his unchangeable decree, when he saw the design of it; for there was no man in all the realm whom he respected so much as the great prime minister. And when his majesty ordered the wicked law to be executed, it is not strange that he could not sleep, and passed the night

¹ Isa. xliii. 1-3. ² Dan. iii. 24, 25. ³ Heb. xi. 34.

fasting, and rose "very early in the morning and went in haste unto the den of lions. And when he came to the den, he cried with a lamentable voice unto Daniel: and the king spake and said to Daniel, O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God, whom thou servest continually, able to deliver thee from the lions? Then said Daniel unto the king, O king, live forever. My God hath sent His angel and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me."¹

This same Jesus, the angel of the covenant, is always present with all His suffering people in all their sorrows. Just before He went up to heaven, He said, "Lo, I am with you alway." In the parting moment, He promised His perpetual presence: "I am going away, nevertheless I will be with you still; and you must not think of me as ever absent, for I shall never be absent. I am with you alway. In sickness, temptation, bereavement, and death, lo, I am with you." And Christ in suffering is Christ indeed.

When we begin the voyage of the better life, He will embark with us, and thenceforth He will be with us through pleasant and through stormy weather. He will be with us when the sea is smooth; and when the sea is rough He will be with us still; nor will He ever fail us or forsake us: "He shall deliver thee in six troubles; yea in seven there shall no evil touch thee."² Christ in the vessel is no security against the tempest; but, blessed be His name, the ship in which He sails can never go under; and so we can sing in all storms:

¹ Dan. vi. 19-22. ² Mat. xxviii. 20. ³ Job v. 19.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea: though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof."¹

Your sufferings will do you good. Suffering is a grace like faith, it is also a means of grace like prayer. It is both the spring and the channel from which and through which we receive grace for grace: "For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake."² Many afflictions are sent upon us, not because we have gone astray, but to prevent us from going astray, and to make us more holy and more heavenly-minded. There is a rod of consolation, as well as a rod of correction, "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."³

Joseph's personal piety was the occasion of his being sold into slavery; and his personal purity was the occasion of his being cast into prison. But, under the circumstances, slavery in Egypt was better for Joseph than freedom in Canaan; and the prison was a safer place for him than Potiphar's house. Besides, these downward steps in the valley of humiliation brought him out into a wealthy place, and up into "the second chariot"⁴ of the king; and the servant was above his master.

The life of every Christian is like Samson's riddle,

¹ Ps. xlii. 1-3.

² Phil. i. 29.

³ Ps. xxiii. 4.

⁴ Gen. xli. 43.

"Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness."¹ The Philistines will never be able to explain it; but to the suffering people of God it is not hard to be understood. By the grace of Christ, they slay the lion which was seeking to devour them, and the next time they pass that way they find a hive of honey in his decaying carcass; something that is very sweet unto the taste, and very refreshing too. Such a pleasant surprise, how good it is, and how often it occurs!

It is the belief of the savage that the spirit of every enemy he slays enters into himself and is added to his own; and, desiring to accumulate a warrior's strength against the day of battle, he slays all he can. Is it your desire to become strong in the Lord and in the power of His might? Then "Why withdrawest thou thy hand, even thy right hand? pluck it out of thy bosom,"² and, taking the sword of the Spirit, let your enemies fall before you. Every sin you smite down, every sorrow you subdue, shall so strengthen your faith that in a little while you may go to the funeral of your fears.

It was through repeated trials and triumphs that David became strong. The king of Israel was amazed when he saw the stripling who had accepted Goliath's challenge: "And Saul said to David, Thou art not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him: for thou art but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth. And David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept his father's sheep, and there came a lion and a

¹ Judges xiv. 14.

² Ps. lxxiv. 11.

bear, and took a lamb out of the flock: and I went after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth: and when he arose against me, I caught him by the beard, and smote him, and slew him. Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear: and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them."¹ And, sure enough, it was even so; for, when the stripling returned from the slaughter field, he brought the giant's dripping head in one hand, and his reeking sword in the other.

Soon after this, David was in greater danger of his life from the wrath of that same Saul whom he had served so well. "Saul eyed David,"² and envied him, and went about "breathing out threatenings and slaughter"³ against him. As he was hunted with savage hate, the coming man once fled into the Tabernacle and asked for a weapon of defence. The priest informed him that there was none there, except the sword of Goliath. "And David said, There is none like that; give it me."⁴

In our spiritual warfare there are no weapons like those with which we vanquish our enemies. The sword with which we have cut off the head of some giant sin, or smote to death some towering temptation, or pierced through some pining sorrow, "there is none like that; give it me," that steel is tried and proved.

Time would fail us to speak of the various ways in which afflictions will do us good. They will make

¹ I Sam. xvii. 33-36.

² I Sam. xviii. 9.

³ Acts ix. 1.

⁴ I Sam. xxi. 9.

us wiser and better, as well as stronger. Sickness and bereavement are the best school-masters in the world; and sorrow's commentary on the Scriptures is the most complete and comprehensive with which we are acquainted. The Bible seems like another book when read through one's tears and in the valley of Achor. And if Paul could speak down from heaven on this subject, he would say, that the "thorn in the flesh" was a better teacher than Gamaliel; a better preacher than himself. "And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness, and briers, and with them he taught the men of Succoth."¹

Trouble is a good microscope by which we can examine ourselves more perfectly, and every time we look through it, we find many faults we never saw before. Even the very best of Christians can not tell how bad they are till they are tried, and no person thoroughly knows himself. When Elisha told him the evil that he would do Hazael was indignant; but with treason hiding in his heart at the time, he returned to the royal palace, murdered his master "on the morrow," and straightway proved himself worse than his own "dog."²

Trouble is also a good telescope through which we can see the promises afar off shining like the brightest stars in the sky of the Scriptures. And the night of weeping is the set time for making celestial observations: "Night unto night showeth knowledge."³

These are some of the reasons why you ought not to fear those things which you shall suffer. We might

¹ Judges viii. 16.

² II Kings viii. 13.

³ Ps. xix. 2.

say more on our timely theme; but a kindred thought suggests itself here, as the conclusion of the whole matter; it is this: if you need fear none of those things which you shall suffer, then surely you need not fear those things which you may suffer only in anticipation.

There are some sombre Christians to whom the future is all dark, and always dark, and its shadows are stretched out over the present, to eclipse all its pleasures. When Mr. Great-Heart and his companions killed Giant Despair, and demolished Doubting Castle, they found in the dungeon "one Mr. Despondency, almost starved to death, and one Much-Afraid his daughter; these two they saved alive." And, strange to say, these two are living still: their hearts are faint; their faith is small; their hope is dim; and because they can neither fight nor fly, they are liable to be taken prisoners again. They go down-cast all their days, and subject to bondage; you never see them smiling, and they are never of good cheer. All the imaginary bitter of the future is drained out into the sweet cup of the present, and poisons all.

For many years "our father Jacob" was such a man. He was the weeping patriarch; but most of his tears might have been spared. He was almost distracted when he said, "Joseph is not, and Simeon is not, and ye will take Benjamin away: all these things are against me."¹ Let us see now if it was really so? When the brethren came back from Egypt

¹ Gen. xlii. 36.

Simeon was with them, and Benjamin was with them; and, better still, they brought these glad tidings of great joy to their broken-hearted father: "Joseph is yet alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt."¹

Moreover, for more than twenty years Jacob was anticipating an unhappy death. When he first saw Joseph's coat, once of many colors, but now all red with blood, he thought his dearest child was dead, and refused to be comforted, saying, "I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning."² He expected nothing else, but that, soon or late, his gray hairs would come down with "sorrow to the grave."³ Such were his long-cherished apprehensions concerning the manner of his departure. But God was better to him than his fears. If his former days were "few and evil,"⁴ his latter days were filled with good and crowned with "beauty for ashes." He had his dwelling-place in the best of the land of Egypt: there, in the immediate vicinity of his best and most beloved son, the last seventeen years of his pilgrimage passed pleasantly away. He had peace and riches and honor in abundance. "At evening time it shall be light."⁵

And now let us go even to Goshen, and see how his gray hairs went down, not with sorrow but with glory, to the grave. There stands the royal chariot at the door; Joseph has come, and Ephraim and Manasseh are with him. All the twelve patriarchs are there, gathered round their dying father to receive

¹ Gen. xlv. 26.

² Gen. xxxvii. 35.

³ Gen. xlii. 38.

⁴ Gen. xlvii. 9.

⁵ Zech. xiv. 7.

his dying blessing: "And Israel said unto Joseph, I had not thought to see thy face: and, lo, God hath showed me also thy seed."¹ With the laying on of hands he blessed them all, and divided the land of promise among them; and then, with prayers and praises, he passed away and was gathered to his people. "By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped leaning upon the top of his staff."²

Perhaps there are some here present whose anticipations are something like those of Jacob. You are old and gray-headed, poor and friendless, and tormented day and night with the fear of fearful things. Many years ago the companion of your pilgrimage—your beautiful and beloved Rachel—"died, and was buried in the way."³ All your children, whom you hoped would be the comfort of your declining age, have been gathered to the grave; and there you stand alone, like some old, branchless, broken oak in the open field. You are admonished by the advancing years, and frequent indisposition, that the end is near; and you are troubled when you think that there is none to be with you in the time of often infirmity; none to minister to your wants in your last sickness; and that you will be borne to your burial by the hands of strangers, and laid away, it may be, in the potter's field.

We will make no apology for saying plainly, that all such thoughts are positively wicked; such fearful forebodings are exceeding sinful. There is One who

¹ Gen. xlviii. 11.² Heb. xi. 21.³ Gen. xxxv. 19.

will be with you in the time of old age: "Even to your old age I am He; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you."¹ There is One who will be with you in your last illness. Jesus, who is better than ten sons, and "the chiefest among ten thousand," will make all your bed for you. Nay, His own dear breast shall be your dying bed, and you shall breathe your life out sweetly there in His embrace. And so far as the burial is concerned, surely, you should not be troubled about that, since it is written: "The beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom."² How imposingly magnificent! how beautiful and glorious beyond expression! angels for bearers; and Abraham's bosom for a cemetery! No burial is worthy to be compared with this; no, not even the burial of "Moses my servant,"³ whose grave was prepared, and whose body was covered by the very hands of God Himself.

"Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."⁴ "The Lord is thy keeper: the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: He shall preserve thy soul. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore."⁵

¹ Isa. xli. 4.² Luke xvi. 22.³ Josh. i. 2.⁴ John xiv. 27.⁵ Ps. cxxi. 5-8.

CROSSING THE JORDAN.



CHAPTER XV.

"Prepare you victuals; for within three days ye shall pass over this Jordan."—JOSH. i. 11.

THE children of Israel were encamped in what might be called their land of Beulah. After forty years of wandering round about, they had emerged from the barren wastes of their desert path, and were resting awhile in peaceful security before starting on the last stage of their long journey.

It was about the middle of the month of April. Their herds of cattle, and flocks of sheep, were quietly grazing in the greenest pastures they had found since leaving Goshen. In full bloom, the fruit-trees and flowers were freighting the air with sweet-smelling fragrance, and the fields of barley were already ripe for the reaper's sickle.

A magnificent view met the eye in every direction. Away to the north spread out the great plain of Esdraelon, shut in by "that goodly mountain and Lebanon." And looking toward the south they could see all "the hill country of Judea,"¹ which was even as the garden of the Lord. Directly before them stood the walled city of Jericho, embosomed in its own emerald palms, which envied not the trees of Eden for their beauty. While just behind them towered up

¹ Luke i. 65.

to heaven, in all their solemn grandeur, the sacred mountains of Nebo and Hor, which were, at the same time, the graves and the gravestones of Moses and Aaron, and the most fitting monuments for those noble brothers, and leal-hearted servants of the Lord.

It was when the redeemed people were reposing in this delightful region of country that they received an order from Joshua, their new commander-in-chief, requiring them to make ready for the passage of the river which still rolled between them and the home of their hearts: "Prepare you victuals; for within three days ye shall pass over this Jordan."

Now, there can be no question, we think, that the Hebrews were a typical people, and in God's dealings with them, and us, the past is repeated in the present.

The land of Egypt, where their lives were made "bitter with hard bondage,"¹ is a good representation of our natural estate; for we are "sold under sin"² into slavery, and Satan is a hard master.

Their journey through the wilderness, with its bitter and sweet waters, seems like one long parable of our Christian pilgrimage, which is made up of nothing else but Marahs and Elims from its commencement to its close.

The land of Canaan, which was "the glory of all lands,"³ and God's own horn of plenty, has been taken by the church in all ages as the most common emblem of heaven itself.

And the Jordan, which was sometimes so narrow

¹ Exod. i. 14.

² Rom. vii. 14.

³ Ezek. xx. 6.

and shallow and slow, that a little child could easily ford it; and then again, in the rainy season, so wide and deep and swift, that it became quite impassable to the strongest swimmer; and now the last barrier betwixt them and the better country, has been generally accepted as the image of death; that cold, dark river which rolls between us and the green fields of Paradise.

And just as the peculiar people had need of special preparation to pass over the Jordan; so we have need to make ready for crossing the darker, deeper, and more dangerous river of death. And hoping to speak a word in season, our further remarks to-day shall cluster around these two timely thoughts suggested by the text: how and why we should prepare for dying.

And, beginning with the lowest suggestion, you will observe that our temporal affairs should be arranged beforehand. The victuals which the Israelites were commanded to prepare against the passage of the Jordan, consisted of the manna which came down from heaven, and also those other supplies, of whatsoever kind, which they could easily procure in the land of plenty where their tents were pitched; for they were now occupying the fruitful fields of Bashan, and the still more fruitful fields of Moab and Midian were on the borders of their camp. When opportunity offered, the people were permitted to purchase the products of the country through which they were passing; and doubtless often did so, that they might have a change of fare. And resting here in

the plain of Jordan and in the lap of plenty, it is more than probable that they gathered in the corn and wine and oil of the region round about.

But most of these provisions had need of much preparation before they were good for food. Even the bread of heaven did not come down into their tents all ready for the table. It fell on the ground outside in the night, and in the form of seed. And in the morning, "The people went about and gathered it, and ground it in mills, or beat it in a mortar, and baked it in pans, and made cakes of it."¹ And the barley, which was now ripe, had to be prepared in a similar manner.

But these supplies, which were necessary for the support of the body, were all temporal things, and as such they suggest the first lesson of the text—this namely, that our worldly affairs should be properly adjusted against the time to die. These are seldom as they ought to be when the summons comes, and often discompose and distress the departing spirit.

In visiting the sick, to aid them in their preparation for dying, we expect to meet the members of the family and the family physician; but we have sometimes met the lawyer in the darkened room, and helped to hold the patient's trembling hand as he signed his name to important papers. And we have no hesitation in saying, that all such necessary business should be attended to in the time of health. It is not only painful, but positively wicked, to worry the dying with their worldly affairs. But yet it must

¹ Num. xi. 8.

be done sometimes. It must be done only because the duty was neglected when it ought to have been done.

There are, doubtless, many here to-day whose business is not in just such a condition as they would like to have it, if they should be called suddenly away. No, your books are not balanced, your debts are not paid, your wills are not written. Indeed, some people have a strange prejudice against doing such things as this last. They are so superstitious that they think, if they should make a will, "the last enemy"¹ would come immediately. And if any of you are in such a case, let me counsel you to get quit of your groundless forebodings and attend to these duties now, "while the evil days come not."²

For your own sake, and for the sake of those whom you most love, let all your temporal matters be set in order at once. And if you have any bequests to make, to the church, or to the charitable or educational institutions of the country, let your last will and testament be written now, when there can be no debate or doubt about the soundness of your mind and memory, nor any danger that the largest part of your estate will be spent in endless litigation.

Again, as a necessary preparation for dying, we should have a personal interest in Christ, who is the antidote of death. "Man shall not live by bread alone."³ The soul needs nourishment as well as the body; and Christ is the only food that can satisfy the hunger of the heart. And the manna was typical of

¹ I Cor. xv. 26.

² Eccl. xii. 1.

³ Mat. iv. 4.

Him, as He Himself hath said: "I am the bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."¹

The Israelites remembered with pleasure the perpetual miracle of the wilderness, and prided themselves on the fact, that their fathers "did eat angels' food."² But the manna was not living bread. It did not, and could not, preserve the people from death in any sense; but the Lord Jesus is emphatically "the bread of life." "As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father; so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live forever."³

He shall live forever, even though his body may turn to dust. The higher spiritual life of the soul, which is nourished by the flesh and blood of the Son of man, shall never perish. The true heavenly bread, of which the manna was the emblem, is soul-quickening, soul-strengthening, soul-sustaining, and soul-satisfying food. And eating of it is not to be understood either literally or sacramentally, but spiritually; for the Saviour was still living, and His last supper had not been instituted, when He said, "Except ye

¹ John vi. 48-51. ² Ps. lxxviii. 25. ³ John vi. 57, 58.

eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you.”¹

It is by faith, and by faith alone, that we are made partakers of Christ and His salvation. By the exercise of this saving grace, we receive and rest upon “Jesus only,”² as He is freely offered to us in the gospel. And the immediate result of such a cordial reception of our only Redeemer is exemption from spiritual and eternal death. And though the body must needs return to the earth, as it was, it shall be raised up again at the last day: “Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.”³

A personal interest in Christ is, therefore, the most important thing in preparing to die, if we would pass away peacefully and hopefully. Indeed we are not prepared to live as we should, till we are born again from above, and have for our daily bread “the bread of life.” But, though we may be able to live without Christ, as many do, we can not die with the good hope of going to heaven, without a personal interest in “our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”⁴

We may be every thing else that is lovely and of good report; we may be the best of husbands and wives, and fathers and mothers, and brothers and

¹ John vi. 53.

² Mat. xvii. 8.

³ John xi. 25, 26.

⁴ II Tim. i. 10.

sisters; we may be the most upright citizens, and greatly distinguished for the amenity of our manners and our angelic amiability;—but if we are not “accepted in the beloved,”¹ if our sins are not blotted out “with the precious blood of Christ,”² and we are not sanctified by the blessed Spirit, we are not, and we can not be, prepared to die. “Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.”³

We remark, further, that in order to be prepared against the time of our departure, we should have a goodly number of the promises stored away in our hearts and minds. The whole Bible is the bread of life, like Him who is at once its author and its subject. Jesus is the burden of every book, the chief end of every chapter, and the substance of all the shadows. “The bright and morning star”⁴ is the central sun round which revelation revolves. But whilst the Scriptures are the glass in which we see the glory of the Lord, and were written to reflect His image more perfectly, they also delight us by the visions, and offers of spiritual food, so varied and abundant as to meet our every need.

Here we have the sincere milk for babes in Christ, apples of comfort for the sick, savory meat for those who are ready to perish, and the best of “wine which cheereth God and man.”⁵ For the endless changes of Christian experience there is in the gospel a word in season; and there are times when nothing tastes so good as the book of God: “Thy words were found,

¹ Eph. i. 6.

² I Pet. i. 19.

³ John iii. 7.

⁴ Rev. xxii. 16.

⁵ Judges ix. 13.

and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart."¹ And if we may prize one portion of inspiration above another, we would select the "exceeding great and precious promises," because they are the "finest of the wheat";² "More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb."³ "How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them!"⁴

They are greater and more precious than we are aware till the set time comes for them to manifest their unspeakable power and inestimable value. They were the stone steps by which Christian might have passed safely through the Slough of Despond, if he had taken heed thereunto. One of them was the key which he carried in his bosom, with which he unlocked the doors in Doubting Castle, and so made his escape from the keep of Giant Despair. They are the hired servants of my Father, sent down from heaven to work on the narrow way. I have often seen them; I can see them now, like laboring men bending to their task and breaking the big stones, making the rough places smooth, the crooked places straight, and with the light of their lamps illuminating all the dark valleys.

And, in regard of having these precious promises stored away in our hearts and minds, we might learn a lesson from the Jews, who took special pains to keep the words of the law continually before them:

¹ Jer. xv. 16.

² Ps. cxlvii. 14.

³ Ps. xix. 10.

⁴ Ps. cxxxix. 17.

"Thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes: and thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates."¹ In literal obedience to this commandment, the Hebrews actually inscribed particular passages of Scripture upon parchment, and wore them on their arms and foreheads. They also fastened other passages on their door-posts, and never went in or out of their dwellings without stopping to kiss the sacred scroll.

And to us there is something beautifully touching and instructive in their keeping the words of God so constantly before their minds. Nor can we wonder that these soon came to be regarded as protecting them from evil, and for this reason were afterwards called phylacteries. Perhaps in their personal experience they had learned something of the power of God's word in preserving them from harm, and shielding them in the time of danger. But whether they had or not, we know of a truth that it is our best body-guard: "When thou goest, it shall lead thee; when thou sleepest, it shall keep thee; and when thou awakest, it shall talk with thee."² One of the very Scriptures which the Jews kept so continually before them was the sword of the Spirit with which Jesus Himself worsted the tempter, "Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve."³

Besides, many of the promises were written, as it would seem, expressly for the time to die: "When

¹ Deut. vi. 8, 9.

² Prov. vi. 22.

³ Luke iv. 8.

thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee."¹ "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee: yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness."² "In the way of righteousness is life; and in the pathway thereof there is no death."³

In making preparation for the time of our departure, these promises, so sweet and precious, and others like them, should be committed to memory, that we may have them ready against the great emergency. During the last days of our sojourn here, the eye may be so dim that it will not be able to read them in the shadow of death; and the swellings of Jordan may make the ear so dull, that it will not be able to hear them read; and if we do not have them graven in the mind for the greatest time of need, no tongue can tell how much we will miss their comforting and sustaining power.

We would observe further, that, to be prepared for death, it should be made the subject of much meditation. And here, for our instruction and imitation, let us call to mind the interesting fact, that when the children of Israel came to the valley of the Jordan, they encamped there for nearly a whole year. God kept His people waiting there, by the brink of the river, several months before crossing to the other side; and, as it appears to us, of a set purpose that

¹ Isa. xliii. 2.² Isa. xli. 10, 11.³ Prov. xii. 28.

their thoughts might often be on the passage of that turbulent stream, and about the good land beyond to which they were going.

With every rising sun they could see the gleaming waters of the river on the right hand and on the left; and day and night, without ceasing, they could hear the noise of its waves as they went rushing by. And as it was just after the rainy season, when they received the command to make ready to pass over into the land of promise, and the banks of the stream were submerged, they must have mused in their own minds, and perhaps also they spoke often to one another, saying: How shall we be able to ford the Jordan now? Such a thing seems quite impossible at present; and, having neither bridge nor pontoon, it would be downright madness to make the vain attempt to cross over. Indeed the strongest swimmer could scarcely hope to make the other side in safety: "for Jordan overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest."¹

And as the peculiar people were halted on the hither side of Jordan, for a long time, so are some of us, and that too, as we believe, in order that we may have time for reflection, and a fitting opportunity to make the crossing the theme of much meditation. We have known many of the Israelites indeed whose tents were pitched on the brink of the dark river for several years; and, by the grace of God, these were the pleasantest years of their lives. And though, at the first, the sight and the sound of the

¹ Josh. iii. 15.

swelling stream made them fear and tremble; yet, after awhile, they would talk about their dying as calmly as they would converse about the commonest duties of the day. They became so familiar with the face of the "last enemy" that he seemed more like a dear friend. They entertained no fears that their faith would fail; they experienced no doubts concerning the promise, "as thy days, so shall thy strength be."¹ "Perfecting holiness in the fear of God,"² they conquered death by taking away his sting; and before they went over into the "better country," the house of their pilgrimage seemed to be pitched on the other side of the swelling flood; and as the Lamb was the light and joy and glory of their "little sanctuary,"³ it was nothing less than a very heaven upon the earth; where they heard the first notes of the new song, and saw the beginning of the beatific vision.

And in regard of ourselves, as we can not tell how long we may be permitted to tarry in the plain of Jordan, we ought to begin at once to think about the time of our departure. Nor need any fear that frequent meditation about dying will make them melancholy, and unfit them for the active duties of life. On the contrary, it will make them happier far, and far more useful. We have read somewhere of a wicked young man who received from a friend the present of a curiously wrought ring, with a death's head in its seal, upon condition that he would wear it, and look at it every day. He accepted the gift carelessly, but performed the condition faithfully; and as he looked

¹ Dent. xxxiii. 25. ² II Cor. vii. 1. ³ Ezek. xi. 16.

at that ring every morning, the sight of his eyes so affected his heart that he soon became an earnest and devoted Christian. The frequent thought of death, and its shadow abiding always on his hand, was blessed to the salvation of his soul.

It is the custom of the Chinese to keep their coffins in their houses where they can be often seen. The ancient Egyptians, at all their feasts, served their guests with some part of a skeleton to put them in mind of their mortality. And, on the day of his coronation, one of the emperors of Constantinople, among other gifts of great value, received the present of a gravestone, to remind him of the coming day when the crown would be taken from his head.

And, in the midst of life and health, it would be good for us if we would often think of that decisive hour that will finish our discipline and fix our destiny; striving, as much as we may be able, to realize our last passage, and surrounding ourselves with the scenes of our last moments. Joseph of Arimathea built his sepulchre in his garden, in the midst of his most familiar delights; and perhaps the frequent sight of "his long home"¹ helped to make him the good and just man and devoted Christian that he was. And it would be well for us, if every time we went out to gather sweet flowers we could see our grave; for we are thoroughly convinced that much meditation about death will help to soften it down, and take away its sting.

Or, better still, we might set apart some day, it

¹ Eccl. xii. 5.

might be our birthday, or the day of our spiritual birth, and spend it as if it were our last day. This would make death a beautiful, a comforting, and a welcome theme. And so, living with the time of our departure always in view, we would "die daily";¹ and, when the last change came, we would have nothing else to do but to lean our weary head on the bosom of our Beloved, and breathe our life out sweetly there.

Our subject is of unspeakable importance to all; and we trust that, by the blessing of God, we may be able to drive a nail on which some of you may be persuaded to hang a hope of heaven. We will not say that you must die, for you are dying now; and are you ready for the great change? There are not many who finish their life work before their life is ended, and instead of leaving the world, and going to the grave, they are driven out of the one into the other: "the wicked is driven away in his wickedness."²

Beloved out of Christ, how would it be with you, if you were summoned to the judgment seat to-day? Are you ready for the reckoning? If you are not, we counsel you to give neither sleep to your eyes nor slumber to your eyelids, till you have made your peace with God. "Will my case be called to-day?" said a client, to his advocate, with the greatest earnestness, having heard that the lord chancellor's decision was expected. "Are you sure," was his anxious inquiry, "that nothing is left undone? If judgment is pronounced against me, I am a ruined man." Dearly beloved and longed-for, if your case should be called

¹ I Cor. xv. 31.

² Prov. xiv. 32.

to-day, before the Judge of all, are you ready? Are you sure that nothing is left undone?

Having dwelt long enough on the necessary preparations for the passage of the dark river, we are coming now to consider the reasons why they should be made at once.

And, beginning with the most obvious of these, you will remark, that we ought to set the house in order, because death is sure to come: "Ye shall pass over this Jordan." In regard of the children of Israel, there seems to have been no absolute necessity for crossing the river at all, in order to enter the promised land; for as the whole eastern bank of the stream was in their possession, they might have marched northward toward its source, where the river is a mere brook, and offers no obstacle to crossing, even in the time of harvest; or, turning to the left hand, they might have rounded the Dead Sea into which it empties, and entered Canaan from the south. But God was guiding His chosen people, in His own chosen way; and it was His plan that they should cross the Jordan, at the time when, and in the place where, it seemed to be impassable: "He led them forth by the right way."¹

Whether it is possible for us to reach heaven without tasting death, is not to be considered here. It is enough for us to know that, according to God's good pleasure, "It is appointed unto men once to die;"² and this universal appointment we can not escape. If by any means we could enter the land of pure

¹ Ps. cvii. 7.

² Heb. ix. 27.

delight without fording the dark river, we might neglect, with impunity, the necessary preparations for its passage; but we can not expect to avoid it in any way; and all men everywhere must struggle in the swelling stream. The path of poverty, the path of usefulness, and the path of honor all alike terminate in the plain of Jordan. In the God-planted garden of Eden, the sentence of death was pronounced on the whole human race. So, then, death is not the debt of nature, as it is commonly called; it is rather the debt of sin, and every man must pay it: "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."¹

From the beginning of the world, only two of the many millions of mankind have passed from earth to heaven without suffering the execution of the universal sentence upon themselves. "By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God."² And when Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, was taking his last walk with Elisha, they came down to the Jordan: "And Elijah took his mantle and wrapped it together, and smote the waters, and they were divided hither and thither, so that they two went over on dry ground. And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven."³

¹ Rom. v. 12.² Heb. xi. 5.³ II Kings ii. 8-11.

These two great saints, Enoch and Elijah, are the only twain, in the whole history of the world, who never tasted death. All the rest of the race have died, and all the rest of the race must surely die, save those saints who may be living at the time of the second advent. "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air."¹ And, unless our lives shall be prolonged till we shall see the sign of the Son of man coming in the clouds, we should expect to die: "For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which can not be gathered up again: neither doth God respect any person; yet doth He devise means, that His banished be not expelled from Him."²

From the universal sentence of death, there is no exception, no exemption, no escape. "There is no discharge in that war";³ none for greatness, none for goodness, none for glory. Other foes may be bribed with riches, soothed with flattery, or melted with tears: but the last enemy is impartial, implacable, and inexorable; neither the charms of beauty, nor the power of wealth, nor the appeal of woe, can avail any thing with him:

"With equal pace impartial fate
Knocks at the palace and the cottage gate."

¹ I Thess. iv. 16, 17. ² II Sam. xiv. 14. ³ Eccl. viii. 8.

The monarch must be taken from his throne; the merchant from the exchange; and the man of letters from his books. The rich man in gay clothing, the poor man in vile raiment, and the foolish man in his folly,—who can not tell his right hand from his left,—all alike must tread the verge of Jordan. “Do not all go to one place?”¹

It should be observed, further, that we ought to make suitable preparation for the last stage of our weary earth-way, because the time of death is so uncertain. When the ancient people of God were all encamped on the bank of the Jordan, and received the command to prepare for the passage, the time for crossing was not precisely stated: “within three days ye shall pass over.” They did not know exactly when the silver trumpet would sound, calling them to strike their tents and fall in line for their last march. It might be blown the third day, or the second day, or the self-same day the order was issued. Doubtless Joshua himself did not know, as yet, the set time for fording the river.

Neither can we tell the exact time of our departure; for though there is nothing so certain as death, there is also nothing so uncertain as the time to die. In the ordinary course of nature, we expect to see old and gray-headed people passing away; but we oftener see the young vanishing from our view. The time once was when parents and grandparents generally preceded their children, and their children’s children to the tomb; but now, for the most part,

¹ Eccl. vi. 6.

the children are taken first. Yes, the tender blade is oftener cut down, than the shock of corn fully ripe; and not unfrequently we see strong men, like Samson, perishing in the prime of life. There is no security against death; there can be none. "The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth; because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass."¹

There is hardly one person in a hundred who reaches the Scripture limit of "threescore years and ten;"² whilst more than half the human race "die in the flower of their age,"³ long before they have numbered half a score of years. "One dieth in his full strength, being wholly at ease and quiet. His breasts are full of milk, and his bones are moistened with marrow. And another dieth in the bitterness of his soul, and never eateth with any pleasure. They shall lie down alike in the dust, and the worms shall cover them."⁴ Without respect of persons, the remorseless reaper is always busy gathering into the grave his plentiful harvest of human flesh; and the spring and the summer are both alike to him. "To every thing there is a season;"⁵—to every thing but death.

"Leaves have their time to fall,
And flowers to wither at the north wind's breath,
And stars to set—but all
Thou hast, all seasons for thine own, O Death."

¹ Isa. xl. 6, 7.

² Ps. xc. 10.

³ I Sam. ii. 33.

⁴ Job xxi. 23-25.

⁵ Eccl. iii. 1.

There are here present, probably, those who have left at home dear friends who are wasting away on beds of languishing. For many months, perhaps, they have not been well enough to come with you to this house of prayer, and they seem to have but a short time to live. A few more days, at most, and "the golden bowl" will be broken, or "the pitcher" at the fountain, or "the wheel"¹ at the cistern; but yet, you may be taken first. Health and strength are no security against death, and this Sabbath may be your last Sabbath. It may be my last Sabbath. We may never again unite our hearts and voices in the prayers and songs of Zion. This present service may be the very last which we shall ever enjoy on the earth; and we may be preaching and hearing our last sermon. Nay, more, this Sabbath day may be our last day. Our pilgrimage may be ended before the morrow is begun, and we may go from this house of God to "the house appointed for all living."²

"Art is long, and time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still like muffled drums are beating
Funeral marches to the grave."

It may be suggested, in the next place, that we should make all needful preparations for death, because the last moment may come soon. Though the time for the Israelites to cross the river was uncertain, still it was not far distant. It was "within three days." It might be the same day when the command was given to prepare their provisions for the passage,

¹ Eccl. xii. 6.

² Job xxx. 23.

or it might be the next day; but it could not be further off than the day following; for then surely their tents must be struck, and the last stage of their journey commenced.

And from the moment that they listened to the order of their leader, we can not help thinking, the mighty multitude must have been most busy in making their preparations, because now the time for crossing was so near, and nearer perhaps than they supposed. Straightway, all was anxiety and activity within their lines. Foraging expeditions were going out in every direction, and coming again bringing their sheaves with them. Threshing-floors were extemporized on every little hill, and the unmuzzled oxen were treading out the corn. The old men and children were gathering up the manna in great haste; and day and night, without ceasing, the sound of their mills and mortars was heard, as the young men and maidens were grinding it for food. All were busy, and the little while, at longest, which they had to prepare, made them all the more anxious to improve every passing hour; and, doubtless, before the three days were ended all things were ready.

And it would be well for us if we would copy their example: "Be ye also ready; for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh."¹ Did any body say, "I will prepare to-morrow"? "Boast not thyself of to-morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth."² You remember the rich man in the gospel, whose ground brought forth so penitently

¹ Mat. xxiv. 44.

² Prov. xxvii. 1.

that he proposed to pull down his barns and build greater, and say to himself, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee."¹ Nay, death may not be so far distant as the setting sun. The small number of our years, and our perfect health, may give us the promise of a long life; but yet it may prove the shortest. Even in our best estate, we are altogether vanity. A morning mist, the flower of grass, and the swift ships,—these are the Scripture images of our life. And a step, a span, a moment,—these are its Scripture measures: "Truly as the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, there is but a step between me and death;"² and the next setting down of the foot may be in the chilling stream. With what haste then, and zeal, and earnestness, and unwearying activity, should we give ourselves to the needful work of getting ready for the great emergency; doubling our diligence, redeeming the time, and doing with our might what our hands find to do, "and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."³

It is necessary to observe, finally, that we should make immediate preparation for fording the dark waters, because dying will be work enough, without having any thing else to do. When viewed in most of its various aspects, death is a very dreadful thing, and the awfulest moment of our life is when we begin to feel that our days are few. The mere thought

¹ Luke xii. 19, 20.² I Sam. xx. 3.³ Heb. x. 25.

of dying has often unmanned the stoutest hearts; and even the best of God's believing people have not been able to meet the issue with perfect composure. The painful putting asunder of the soul and the body and the consigning of this last to its original elements—dust to dust, ashes to ashes, earth to earth—is so unnatural and evil and bitter that we shrink back from it in dismay. And we can not help doing so, for we were not made for such an ignominious end.

And then, sorer still, the parting from dear friends and kindred, who are bound to us with ties that are softer than silk and stronger than iron, this is something that goes hard against the grain of the holiest heart, and fills the mind with unutterable anguish. Besides, the time to die is often the time of sickness, which is distressing, and sometimes distracting too. And when wearisome nights are appointed to us, and we are full of tossings to and fro, and pain is piercing in every part, like a thorn in the flesh—is that the time to prepare to die? When the body is weakened with disease, and the mind is wandering—is that the time to make our calling and election sure?

In ministering to those who were sick unto death, we have often heard them express the opinion that the dying bed is no place to prepare for death. And we have had abundant evidence of the truth of this faithful saying in the experience of some who had neglected the claims of religion till the time of their departure was at hand. Even in the time of health and strength, it is no easy thing to repent of sin, and

crucify the old man, and resist the devil, and become an earnest Christian; and when we have neither of these, and the mind and body are both enfeebled by disease, it is next to impossible.

"If only you could go with your minister in his visits to the sick, and be introduced to one poor sufferer after another, you would be thoroughly convinced of the truth of what we say; for whether the patient manifested the wildness of fever, or the exhaustion of consumption, or the anguish of some deep-seated pain, the same lesson would be mercifully delivered: the lesson that, whilst the earthly house of this tabernacle is being taken down, there is the least possible ability of laboring after an entrance into the heavenly inheritance. And if, by the progress of disease, the last hours of life are wrested from the dying man's control, that which was so difficult becomes quite impossible; and, deprived of reason, he passes into eternity, to find out what a fearful thing it is to fall into the hands of a living God."

Suppose, for a moment, that the Hebrews had neglected to obey the order in the text; would it have been possible for them to pitch their tents in the middle of the river, and kindle their camp fires in the swellings of Jordan, and prepare for the passage, when they were making the passage? So, it may not be possible for you to prepare for dying, when the time of your departure is at hand; and, therefore, the message comes to you with all the more force, "Prepare to meet thy God."¹ Delay no longer this

¹ Amos iv. 12.

most important of all life's duties, but "Acquaint now thyself with Him and be at peace."¹

Our sermon is now ended, but we must be allowed to add, by way of application, that it brings abundant encouragement to every son and daughter of the Lord Almighty. As we have already intimated, death is often dreadful enough even to the Christian. But if only you will prepare for it, as we have recommended, its dreadfulness will depart. In the epistle to the Hebrews we read of some, "Who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage."² And among the saints of the present generation we meet with many whose bright days are all darkened by "the shadows of the evening."³ Perhaps, indeed, I speak to some of these fearing disciples, and for your special comfort I would remind you, that God is often better to His people than their fears.

It is more than probable that the children of Israel entertained many and great fears concerning the passage of the Jordan. But, behold what God did for them! It was the next day after the order of the text was issued that Joshua issued another, saying, "Sanctify yourselves: for to-morrow the Lord will do wonders among you."⁴ To-morrow soon came, and early in the morning there were strange movements in the Hebrew camp. The tents were all struck; the Tabernacle was taken down; the banners were lifted up; and the twelve tribes were harnessed and disposed in their usual marching order.

¹ Job xxii. 21.

² Heb. ii. 15.

³ Jer. vi. 4.

⁴ Josh. iii. 5.

But where are they going? Have they given up all hope of crossing the river, and are they about to retire to the wilderness, in which they had wandered so long? Have they heard the sad tidings that the giant "sons of Anak"¹ are coming down upon them from the north country? and are they making haste to get out of the way of these men of "great stature"? Many causes might be imagined for the strange commotion in their camp; but the truth soon appears, as "The ark of the covenant" is seen moving slowly towards the river. The priests, bearing their blessed burden, marched with measured steps, and great solemnity, straight into the rushing stream, and just as soon as their feet "were dipped in the brim of the water,"² the waters clave to the other shore. "And the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the midst of Jordan, and all the Israelites passed over on dry ground, until all the people were passed clean over Jordan."³

And, beloved in the Lord, if only you will lay hold of the Saviour's strength, and cast yourselves entirely on His kind arms, with His dying grace He will do wonders for you in the dying hour. A great trembling may come upon you when you think of going down to tread the verge of Jordan: "For ye have not passed this way heretofore."⁴ But Jesus has; and you shall see His footprints along the shore. "He knoweth all the fords," and will be your guide unto death and through death. And by His presence and

¹ Num. xiii. 33.

² Josh. iii. 15.

³ Josh. iii. 17.

⁴ Josh. iii. 4.

blessing your passage of the dark waters shall be as pleasant as that of the pilgrims at the close of their progress.

"Now I shall have no more need of these crutches, since yonder are chariots and horses for me to ride on," said the lame man whom Bunyan calls Mr. Ready-to-halt; and he left them on this side of the river. The last words of Mr. Despondency were, "Farewell, night! Welcome, day!" Miss Much-Afraid went "singing" through the swellings of Jordan. And when Mr. Standfast was about half way over, he stood awhile and talked on this wise to those who had waited on him thither, "This river has been a terror to many; yea, the thoughts of it also have frightened me: now, methinks, I stand easy; my foot is fixed upon that on which the feet of the priests that bare the ark of the covenant stood, while Israel went over Jordan. The waters, indeed, are to the palate bitter, and to the stomach cold; yet the thoughts of what I am going to, and of the conduct that waits for me on the other side, doth lie as a glowing coal at my heart. I see myself now at the end of my journey: my toilsome days are ended. I am going to see that head that was crowned with thorns, and that face that was spit upon for me. I have formerly lived by hearsay and faith; but now I go where I shall live by sight, and shall be with Him in whose company I delight myself. I have loved to hear my Lord spoken of; and wherever I have seen the print of His shoe in the earth, there I have coveted to set my foot too. His name has been to me as a civet-

box; yea, sweeter than all perfumes. His voice to me has been most sweet; and His countenance I have more desired than they that have most desired the light of the sun. His words I did use to gather for my food, and for antidotes against my faintings. He has held me, and hath kept me from mine iniquities; yea, my steps have been strengthened in His way."

"Now, while he was thus in discourse, his countenance changed; his strong men bowed under him: and after he had said, 'Take me, for I come unto thee,' he ceased to be seen of them."

"But glorious it was to see, how the open region was filled with horses and chariots, with trumpeters and pipers, with singers and players on stringed instruments, to welcome the pilgrims as they went up, and followed one another in at the beautiful gate of the city."

Believing that there are some here present who have made no preparation for dying, we can not close without a word in season to them. And, beloved out of Christ, what shall we say to you? If what we have already said has made no impression on your minds, what shall we more say? In a little while you, too, must go down into the dark waters; and what will you do then, if you have no personal interest in Christ?

Perhaps, already in the time of "pining sickness,"¹ you have had some faint foretoken of what it will be to die. And, if the shaking of the tabernacle proved greater than you could bear, how will you endure the

¹ Isa. xxxviii. 12.

dissolution of the earthly house? If you could not cross with composure the shallow stream of some slight indisposition, how will you be able to ford the deep river, where Christian was almost drowned? "If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?"¹

It is often the most difficult thing for God's dearest people to die. They come down fearing and trembling to the bank of the river, and launch away, hoping against hope. And now sinking, and then rising, and always struggling, they just make the shining shore: "And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?"² Have you not heard, have you not read, and do you not know, that the river Jordan empties into the Dead Sea—that only earthly image of the second death? And may I not remind you, here and now, that if you fail to reach the heavenward side of the darker river towards which your feet are tending, you will be carried swiftly down with the raging flood, and cast away "in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death."³

What! can it be possible that some of you have made no preparation for dying. Liable at any moment to be called to cross the swelling stream, and yet, you have neither staff, nor scrip, nor provisions for the passage. And how can you expect to reach

¹ Jer. xii. 5.

² I Pet. iv. 18.

³ Rev. xxi. 8.

the other side in safety? But if you are awakened, you need not despair; if you are anxious, you may have hope: for Jesus, our Joshua, is standing here to-day, with open, outstretched arms, calling you to come to Him. Hear how tenderly He pleads with you! "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."¹ Come now; time is precious; time is passing, and in a little while time shall be no longer.

We have read somewhere of a little child who was pleasantly and peacefully passing over Jordan. Kindred and kind friends were gathered round her dying couch waiting upon her, and anticipating every want. Her eye was growing dim, and she could scarcely see. Her ear was growing dull, and she could scarcely hear. Her tongue was cleaving to the roof of her mouth, and could hardly do its office any more: for she could only speak at long intervals, and in the lowest whisper.

Noticing that her lips were moving, a member of the family leaned over and listened, if perchance her dying words might be heard, and garnered up. In a soft, sweet, still, small voice she said, "Lift me higher." Her loving mother made haste to put a pillow under her head. But still she kept on saying the same thing: "Lift me higher;" and with gentle hands they raised her up, and pressed another pillow under her shoulders.

Perceiving now that she was misunderstood, she stretched out her pale, thin hand and pointed upward,

¹ Mat. xi. 28.

saying, "No, no, not that, but there! lift me higher!" Then they knew that she was talking not to them down here, but to Jesus in heaven; and so praying, she vanished from their view. And on her gravestone there is, first of all, the image of her pure white hand pointing upward, then her name and age, and then these words, "Lifted higher."

Dearly beloved, when soon or late your dying feet shall touch the dark waters, may your experience be like hers; and when your ear can not hear it, may this be your eulogy; when your eye can not see it, may this be your epitaph, "Lifted higher."

"The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace."

OUR HEAVENLY HOME.

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CHAPTER XVI.

"In my Father's house are many mansions."—JOHN xiv. 2.

HOME, mother, Jesus, and heaven, are the sweetest words in human language. And in all this congregation, as we fondly think, there can not be found one whose heart will not respond most heartily to our faithful and true saying, concerning these best and ever blessed words,—home, mother, Jesus, and heaven.

A mother at home makes home so sweet; her living presence is brighter than the brightest sunshine in the shadiest place of sorrow; and to her loving smile the father's house is indebted for more than half of its happiness. And a mother in heaven makes heaven more homelike, and more to be desired; while a whole family in heaven, sitting at the feet of Jesus, were enough to double its unspeakable joys.

It would be pleasant and profitable to contemplate heaven, as the Lamb-lit city, and the life-watered Paradise; but it will be more pleasant and more profitable to consider it as our Father's house and future home; for such it truly is, and actually will be if we are His children. It brings heaven nearer, and renders it dearer to our hearts, when our Elder Brother speaks about it after this manner: "In my Father's house are many mansions."

All that is precious in the recollection of our earthly father's house, all that is sweet in the remembrance of that home—a word so musical in its sound, and so big with blessed meaning—is here summoned by the Saviour to express the blessedness of that heaven from which He came and to which He was going, and which will one day be the habitation and the happiness of every follower of Jesus: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."¹

My father's house, your father's house, our father's house, how much like home it makes our heaven seem! When we think of God as God, "the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy,"² a dreadful feeling comes over us. "When I consider, I am afraid of Him."³ And as we come troubled and trembling to His presence, we can almost hear Him saying, "Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet: for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground."⁴ But when we think of Him as our Father,—knowing the tenderness of a father's heart, having seen the tear standing in a father's eye, and the kind words of welcome quivering on his lip,—the dreadful feeling flies away, and we begin to love Him: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear."⁵

¹ John xiv. 2, 3.² Isa. lvii. 15.³ Job xxiii. 15.⁴ Exod. iii. 5.⁵ I John iv. 18.

So, when we think of heaven as heaven, that pure and holy place where "the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God,"¹ is "dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto,"² we are overwhelmed and oppressed with the tormenting thought that we shall never be able to reach "the land that is very far off."³ As we strive to climb that way, the better country seems to recede further from our sinful selves, as the stars appear to fly away from the traveller who is ascending the Andes. "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me: it is high, I can not attain unto it."⁴ But when we think of heaven as our Father's house, and the dear home to which our best brother Jesus went, when He went away, it brings it down from its inaccessible height, and draws it so near to us that there is but a step between its threshold and our pilgrim feet.

And when the stranger feeling comes over us in this strange land, it is no wonder that we become so homesick that, like Paul, we are in a "strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better."⁵ Our eyes are often turned towards heaven, and, in the "time to mourn," our hearts are like to break with the longing they have to be at home. Not long ago, at the landing by the river-side, we saw a company of emigrants with their boxes and bundles. The little children were gathered around a big iron-bound chest, which had the look of a far country, and the smell of the sea. This chest

¹ I Tim. i. 17.² I Tim. vi. 16.³ Isa. xxxiii. 17.⁴ Ps. cxxxix. 6.⁵ Phil. i. 23.

served them for a table, and was furnished with just one loaf of bread, and a cup of cold water. While the sorrowful mother waited on her beloved offspring, now and then she drew the corner of her apron across her eyes, thinking, doubtless, about that far away father's house that lay so heavy on her heart. It would have been better for her every way, if she could have forgotten the sweet home she left beyond the sea, and addressed herself to the duty of making another in this better country.

But in regard to the Christian homesick for heaven, it would be better for him, more and more, to think about it: to make it his meditation all the day, and when waking in the watches of the night. By doing so, he would become more homesick, it is true; but, at the same time, he would become more happy, and more heavenly-minded, till at last, with wings like a dove, he would fly away and be at rest.

And be at rest. To many people the rest of heaven is its chief attraction. The working man, as bending to his task, the sweat of sorrow bursts upon his face; the sick man stretched, as it would seem to be, upon a bed of thorns, and tossed to and fro with a burning fever; and the man of mental labor, who earns his bread by the sweat of his brain,—all these think of heaven as a place of rest: rest from toil, rest from care, rest from pain. Now all this heaven is and more abundantly. It is a home rest. The tired traveller may rest very well at the tavern, and the sick man may rest at the hospital; but rest at home is the sweetest rest. The weary-footed wayfaring man

never rests so well, nor sleeps so soundly, as in his father's house. And who does not know that the aching head never lies so softly as on the pillow smoothed by a mother's hand.

Home is that sweet and holy place where the soul lives and loves and lingers, refusing ever to depart; and to which it often brings the absent body back with willing and elated feet. The tenderest associations, the purest joys, the brightest hopes, and the dearest memories cluster round that dwelling-place of so many delights, compared with which, all other abodes are cold and comfortless. It has ties softer than silk, and stronger than iron, with which the members of the family are bound together like a bundle of myrrh. Touched by its magic power, the hardest human heart begins to melt and run away, like rivers of waters, through eyes unused to weep. Who does not know something of its strength and sweetness? What man is there among you, in whose ear the thought of home does not float like celestial music? When the siege of Vicksburg was over and ended, many of the soldiers obtained a furlough to return home, to rest awhile; and immediately it passed into a proverb in the camp, "They are going to paradise." After their forced marches, their long-suffering in the trenches, and their hard fighting, they were better able to appreciate their home; and, with one consent, they called it paradise.

And now, although we may not take the earthly home as the express image of the heavenly, nevertheless, by placing them side by side, through the

imperfections of the one, we shall be better able to see the perfections of the other.

Heaven is a happy home. The earthly home is never perfectly happy; and in many families there is more misery than we imagine. And, knowing that they are all unhappy, we should rather say that one is less sorrowful than another. If only we could be lifted up to some lofty plane beyond yon azure canopy, and all beneath were unroofed and visible to our eyes, how many mourners and how much suffering would we see!

Down there in that damp basement, there is a poor broken-hearted widow surrounded by her children, half clad and hungry and crying for bread. And in the top story of the same dilapidated tenement, a mother is dying. One after another, her beloved offspring come bending over her couch, saying, with strong crying and tears, "Mother, dear mother, do you not know me?" and all at once she breathes no more. Over yonder in that new house by the hill-side, there is an empty cradle in the dark corner of an empty chamber, and two lonely parents cowering over the lifeless but sacred body of their cherub-like child. And in that little cottage just across the street, an aged father is already confined, and the black hearse is waiting at the door to take him to his long home.

Yes, and in many dwellings far and near, there would be sadder things than these, if we could see them; for there is something worse than death: there is a nameless sorrow, and a hidden grief, which with

invisible hands, and a hammer without sound drives the sharpest iron through the father's heart, when he thinks about his poor prodigal son; and sends the mother of her lost daughter mourning to an untimely grave. A living trouble is worse than a dead trouble.

It was the wickedness of his children that made Jacob such a sorrowful man. Who can forget the story of Joseph? His brethren envied him; they were jealous of him; they hated him; and, in order to get him out of the way, they sold him into perpetual slavery. And having stained his coat of many colors with the blood of a kid, they took the red thing home to their father's tent, saying, with their lying lips, "This have we found: know now whether it be thy son's coat or no; and he knew it, and said, It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him: Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces."¹

What disposition the weeping patriarch made of that bloody garment, we do not know; but we can not help thinking that he fondly cherished it as a remembrancer of his best and best beloved son; and his eyes never rested on it, that they were not blinded by unbidden tears. The bitter thought, that it was Joseph's coat, was a blessed thought as well as bitter; and we can not count it a strange thing if it was cherished, though it crushed the heart that cherished it.

There is a touching story, something like this, concerning a little child in Switzerland. Like Moses, he was "exceeding fair,"² and had so many sweet and winning ways that he was almost worshipped. With

¹ Gen. xxxvii. 32, 33.

² Acts vii. 20.

her own hands, his mother made him a little coat of scarlet silk, all curiously and exquisitely embroidered; and the next morning after the "raiment of needle-work" was finished, she put it on him, and sent him out to play. A mother's kiss was still resting on his ruddy cheek, and he had scarcely passed the threshold of the cottage, where he was born, when a great eagle snatched him away to her nest high up among the mountains, but still within sight of that home of which he had been the joy and expectation. The eyrie was inaccessible, and there, with deliberation, as it would seem, the eagles gathered and devoured him. But, in tearing the child asunder, these birds of prey left his "gay clothing" hanging partly over the edge of the nest like a little flag. When the wind blew it would flutter, and when the sun shined its bright buttons would sparkle. For a long time after the eagles abandoned their nest, that little coat was visible there; and every time the father went to his work, he would look that way, saying in his heart, so sadly, "It is my son's coat." And as week after week the mother watched it from the window of her house, it became the double emblem of her joy and sorrow.

And in the happiest earthly home there is constantly coming to pass something like this. The little high chair, once so beautifully occupied by your Benjamin and Benoni, but now so painfully empty, will sometimes be seen, no matter where you store it away. And when, in haste, you open the drawer in search of something your face turns pale, and your

tears begin to flow, "Woman why weepest thou?" Is it not because you saw some memorial of the dear departed? Perhaps it was the dead baby's dress,—a long white baptismal dress; or a little pair of worsted shoes. Perhaps it was a pocket Bible, a birthday gift to one who is gone to the grave,—your son's Bible,—the book he loved to read so much; and though his mouldering fingers shall mark its precious passages no more, yet, how much you prize it! Why, every leaf is better worth to you than the biggest bank-note that was ever issued! a sad yet sweet memorial. Perhaps it was a coat—your son's coat, the one he wore the last time he went out to walk—your Joseph's coat. Perhaps it was a photograph, only the shadow it is true, but yet, the very next thing to the substance: his form is there, and every feature is so perfect; and, best of all, his smile is there, so sweet and pleasant, with which he used to meet you morning, noon, and night. And when you take the large Bible on your knee, to read a chapter, it will often open, of itself, between the Testaments; and, as you glance at the family record, you notice that the births and the burials are exactly equal to one another.

Such things as these are constantly occurring in the happiest earthly home; but in the heavenly home, "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."¹ Sin, which is the

¹ Rev. xxi. 4.

cause of all our suffering here, shall never enter there; and just because we shall be free from sin forever, we shall be forever free from sorrow. In the book of Life no death will ever be recorded, and in the better country no grave will ever be opened. There will be no time "to heal" in heaven, and no time "to hate," and no time "to pluck up that which is planted," and no time "to mourn;" all will be a time of health and love and life and "joy unspeakable and full of glory."¹ Not one of the many mansions when once occupied shall ever be left empty; no bounding heart will ever be broken in heaven, and no bright eye will ever be dimmed there with time or trouble or tears, or any such thing. The complete happiness of "the whole family in heaven"² is set before us in these splendid and sublime words of inspiration,—words which Robert Burns, the peasant poet of Scotland, could never read without weeping,—“These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple: and He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more: neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat: for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.”³

Heaven is a beautiful home. The imagery of the

¹ I Pet. i. 8.

² Eph. iii. 14.

³ Rev. vii. 14-17.

text was probably borrowed from the Temple in Jerusalem, which Jesus was sometimes pleased to call His Father's house, and which was confessedly the most beautiful and imposing structure that ever adorned the earth. It was made after a heavenly pattern, and was intended to be the "shadow of heavenly things."¹ It was, in every sense, "the house of the Lord," and was built according to His most special directions, and for His most special habitation. It was, in fact, a little heaven, chosen as the visible dwelling-place of the Most High; and consecrated, sanctified, and glorified by His visible presence. It was beautiful for situation, more beautiful in itself, but most beautiful in its purpose: "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined."² Guided by the Old Testament, many have attempted to describe the Temple but they have all failed; and those who saw it and walked through its courts have succeeded no better; because there is neither speech nor language by which its glory and its beauty could be sufficiently set forth. Its exterior appearance rivalled the splendor of the rising sun; while the interior was finished and furnished and enriched and embellished with every thing that nature and art and wealth and taste could supply. In the expressive language of inspiration, it was, as it was to be, "exceeding magnificent, of fame and of glory throughout all countries."³

Moreover, our heavenly home, is a house of mansions. And a mansion is better every way than a cottage or a common dwelling. It is more elegant, com-

¹ Heb. viii. 5.² Ps. l. 2.³ I Chron. xxii. 5.

modious, and inviting; and can be owned and occupied only by the noble, the wealthy, and the great people of the earth. In the lowly tenement of the laboring poor there is hardly room enough for the family; and a dwelling-house which is ample and conveniently arranged is greatly to be desired; but a mansion is something very magnificent, being better located, and superior in its construction, and furnished with all the comforts and elegancies and luxuries of life.

In our democratic country there is but one building that is called a palace; and mansions are so few that the majority of our people have never seen any of them. Let us, therefore, glance at one as we pass along. Its beautiful surroundings need scarcely envy Eden for their surpassing loveliness. Entering the enchanted grounds, at the grand avenue gate, we are introduced, at once, into a very wilderness of glory. Here is "every tree which is pleasant to the sight and good for food;" and among the ambrosial branches there are birds of varying song, and smiling at our feet are flowers of every hue and sweetest fragrance. Streams, clear as crystal, artificial lakes, and fountains flinging rainbows all around, contribute much to the charming beauty of this little paradise through which we pass to the palace. As we draw near, there rises to our view, story above story, a residence which rivals the home of royalty. The seat of an ancient and honorable family; it was builded long ago in the best style of architecture, and is a perfect gem of beauty. But all its exterior splendor grows pale, and suffers a total eclipse, when we pass

within. Here, every hall and room is filled with every thing that heart could wish, and the cunning workman could devise. All the walls are adorned with the best productions of the pencil; while the gold and silver cups, and bronze vases, and marble statues, are too numerous to be counted. Not only is there nothing wanting anywhere, but every apartment is so superbly decorated that the eye is dazzled, and the mind bewildered with the superlative profusion of beauty. "Through wisdom is an house builded; and by understanding it is established: And by knowledge shall the chambers be filled with all precious and pleasant riches."¹

And when heaven is spoken of under the similitude of a mansion, the splendor of our future dwelling-place is certainly foretokened. And as before our advancing steps and admiring eyes, the pearly gates of that glorious home open of themselves, "on golden hinges turning," we almost hesitate to speak of its exceeding excellency. No mortal tongue can express its unspeakable magnificence; nor can the harps of all the angels sound out all its praises. The world has been emptied of its richest imagery, and the whole universe has contributed whatever is beautiful to set forth its glory; but all these figures combined can cast no more than the dim shadow of heaven: "For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, besides thee, what He hath prepared for him that waiteth for Him."²

¹ Prov. xxiv. 3, 4.

² Isa. lxiv. 4.

In the Scriptures there is now and then a glimpse of our Father's house; but just here, where the desire to know more is greatest, the spirit of inspiration is silent, and the sacred writers are dumb. We often wondered that it should be so; but now we wonder no more, because that heaven which could be brought down to human comprehension would not be worth having. And much as we love to look at the gorgeous imagery with which John has invested the mansions of bliss, we greatly prefer Paul's more simple but most sublime description of them, when he says, "he was caught up into Paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter."¹ The great apostle, so far as we know, is the only man who ever visited heaven. He walked the golden streets of the New Jerusalem, entered into our Father's house, and saw the glorious mansions; and when he returned, he made no mention of the matter for more than fourteen years. And when he did speak about it, in defence of his commission, he made no attempt to tell us his experience, because it was above and beyond all telling. Let us rejoice, therefore, and be exceeding glad that we are going to a paradise of such surpassing glory and beauty that it can not be described.

Heaven is an abiding home. It seems obvious enough that our house of mansions is not a temporary but a permanent dwelling-place; but to make this truth still more manifest, we may be permitted to remark that the root of the word rendered man-

¹ II Cor. xii. 4.

sions means to remain: "There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God."¹ And this is confessedly the crowning glory of heaven, and ministers the sweetest comfort, and the strongest consolation, to those of us who are on our journey home. "Here have we no continuing city;"² "no certain dwelling-place."³ It is true we may not seem like wayfaring men; nevertheless we are nothing better. King David's stately palace was a house of pilgrimage.

For the most part, we dwell in hired houses, and this makes them appear more like the moving tents they are. And although some of us may have the old homestead for our habitation, still it is perishing and passing away: "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh."⁴ The house can not be built that will resist the ravages of time. Where now are the golden mansions of the giant cities of Bashan? Go ask the modern traveller who, through much digging, finds in their graves a few broken fragments of their former glory. And our Father's house in Jerusalem, which was built of such great stones,⁵ where is it? Once and again, it was swept away by the torch of the spoiler. Even God's own house could not be insured against the consuming flame, and for many years this sore lamentation has been rising from its ruins: "Our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, is burned up with fire; and all our pleasant things are laid waste."⁶

¹ Heb. iv. 9.² Heb. xiii. 14.³ I Cor. iv. 11.⁴ Eccl. i. 4.⁵ Ezra v. 8.⁶ Isa. lx. 11.

And as for ourselves, we too are perishing and passing away, we are no better than the houses of our pilgrimage. "Our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding."¹ Our fleeting bodies are but the shelter tents of our pilgrim souls. But when at last we come to the blessed end of our weary earth-way, we shall have an immortal body, and an abiding home. In place of the shifting tent, we shall have the house of mansions; and the pilgrim shall become "a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out."² "For we know that, if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."³

Sometimes when joining in the family worship, where father and mother, and brothers and sisters, constitute "the church that is in their house,"⁴ I have felt, in my own mind, the painful presentiment of the days when those sunny faces shall turn pale on the dying pillow, one after another, and those pleasant voices shall be hushed in the silence of the grave, and that sweet home, whose roof-tree rings with the Lord's song morning and evening shall be left lonely and desolate. But I have comforted myself with the blessed assurance, that after that perishing home shall have passed away, like "a dream when one awaketh,"⁵ there will be another and a better home on high. It will be the everlasting resting-place of the long lost and much loved ones: that spot, than all

¹ I Chron. xxix. 15.

² Rev. iii. 12.

³ II Cor. v. 1.

⁴ Rom. xvi. 5.

⁵ Ps. lxxiii. 20.

beside, the brightest and the best, where all the wide scattered sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty shall be gathered together; and the broken circles of earth shall be mended in heaven; and the loved ones shall be ever loved and never lost again: "Their inheritance shall be forever."¹

If only the thought of parting were permitted to enter the minds of the redeemed in glory, it would make them unhappy. The blinding tears would gather in their eyes as they looked around on the beautiful love-built mansions they might have to leave; there would be a deep bass undertone of sadness in the new song, and they would sing it like a melancholy wail, if there was any peradventure that it might cease. And oh, how their poor hearts would break and their tongues stammer when they attempted to talk to one another about the possibility of the former things returning!

But, God be thanked, this tormenting thought shall never cross the threshold of the heavenly home. When we enter our Father's house, we shall carry with us, not only the conviction that we are going home, but that we are going to an abiding home. "Here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come:"² "a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God."³ Here, in the earthly home, our father grows old and dies; and gray hairs are here and there upon our elder brother: but our Father in heaven is without beginning of years or end of days; and our Elder Brother Jesus is "The

¹ Ps. xxxvii. 18.

² Heb. xiii. 14.

³ Heb. xi. 10.

same yesterday, and to-day, and forever."¹ There are no furrows on His brow; His eyes are not dim; and "His locks are bushy and black as a raven."² And as unchanging as their ever-living Father, and as young as their never-dying Brother, the whole family in heaven shall be. The mother there shall clasp in her arms, and carry in her bosom, the babes that preceded her to glory; and the painful thought of parting with them will never bring a shadow on her countenance. The brother whose sister gave him the home welcome to heaven, shall never experience the sorrow of being separated again from one so mild and lovely. He who enters that happiest home feels that the last conflict is over, the last tear is shed, the last sigh is hushed; and that henceforth he shall never change, except from glory to glory.

Oh, thou inhabitant of the continuing city, thou member of the heavenly home, thrice happy art thou! "Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself."³ Thine will ever be a brow on which the drops of toil shall never burst; and beneath the weight of waning years thy celestial body shall never bend; nor shall thy work or worship ever make thee weary. Thy happiness is more than doubled by the blessed assurance of its eternal duration. Thou shalt sing the new song forever; thou shalt sweep the golden harp forever; and all the hills of heaven shall echo evermore these notes that are divine, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."⁴

¹ Heb. xiii. 8.

² Cant. v. 11.

³ Isa. lx. 20.

⁴ Ps. xxiii. 6.

Heaven is a peaceful home. The mansions are all in one house; and the separate abodes of the redeemed in glory are all within the same walls. In the earthly temple at Jerusalem, the several courts were within the same sacred enclosure; and the numerous chambers where the priests and Levites lodged, and the apartments of such devout worshippers as Anna and Simeon, were all under the same roof. When gathered within the precincts of their sanctuary, at the annual feasts, the twelve tribes were one. On the same altar they laid their various sacrifices; from their united hearts the same prayers were offered; and with one voice they sung the Lord's song. When David contemplated this beautiful sight, he said, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; as the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore."¹

And, blessed be God, it will be so with the whole family in heaven. In perfect and perpetual love, in perfect and perpetual peace, the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty shall dwell together in their Father's house; and never forever shall any root of bitterness spring up to disturb their friendly and familiar intercourse. Here and now there are disputes and divisions among them: "Brother goeth to

¹ Ps. cxxxiii.

law with brother, and that before the unbelievers."¹ In the conduct of the most distinguished saints great faults are often painfully apparent. The goodliest cedars are not all good; some of them are very crooked and rough and gnarly, and have need of a great deal of cleaving and hewing and polishing. "By their fruits ye shall know them."² Hence we would not question the personal piety of any man, because grace can grow anywhere, even on a thorn-bush, or a wild olive-tree. But, it will not be denied, that many of the Lord's chosen people are so imperfect and impertinent, that it is hard to love them; and, indeed, the tempers of some are so bad, and their tongues so sharp, that it is not pleasant to have any communion or fellowship with them at all. Like a chestnut bur, there is good fruit within them, and their hearts are lined with a substance that is softer than silk velvet, but all over the outside they bristle with prickles, and we do not care to take them by the hand.

Long ago, when only one family constituted the church, and that family consisted of but three members, together with their servants, they could not agree. Strange as it may seem, into the tent of "the friend of God,"³ where angels were often entertained, discord entered: "And there was a strife between the herdmen of Abram's cattle and the herdmen of Lot's cattle;"⁴ and this disagreement resulted in a life-long separation.

¹ I Cor. vi. 6.

² Mat. vii. 20.

³ James ii. 23.

⁴ Gen. xiii. 7.

Although the twelve patriarchs were the sons of the same father, they could not dwell together in peace; they hated Joseph; they conspired to kill him; they sold him into Egypt. And when their despised brother was lord of all the land, and they were going away the second time with something better than corn to carry to their father, they had need of the admonition, "See that ye fall not out by the way."¹

The twelve tribes were no better than the twelve patriarchs. Jealousy and envy manifested themselves in the wilderness, and ripened at last into an open and successful rebellion in Canaan; and for more than two hundred years there were two kings and two kingdoms in the Holy Land; and from the beginning to the end of their history, the mutual relation of Israel and Judah is expressed in the recorded fact that, "There was war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam all their days."²

Even the twelve apostles who sat together at the Saviour's feet often "disputed among themselves who should be the greatest."³ And the best of them all seems to have been the most bigoted and sectarian; for he would rather that a poor man should go possessed with a devil all his days, than that one not belonging to Christ's company should cure him: "John answered and said, Master we saw one casting out devils in thy name: and we forbade him, because he followeth not with us."⁴

¹ Gen. xlv. 24.

² I Kings xiv. 30.

³ Mark ix. 34.

⁴ Luke ix. 49.

During the pentecostal revival, the church was perfectly united for the first time in its history: "The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul."¹ But this was the last time the church was perfectly united, as well as the first time. Those days of heaven on earth were very few; before the showers of blessings ceased, the fraternal spirit waxed cold, and in a little while, the brethren began to "bite and devour one another."² At Antioch Paul withstood Peter to his face, "because he was to be blamed."³ In going about to preach the gospel of love, Paul and Barnabas could not "keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace;"⁴ "and the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other."⁵ The church of Corinth was a house divided against itself, every one of them was saying, "I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ;"⁶ and some of the other churches which were planted by the apostles were scarcely any better.

And these divisions and contentions have continued down to the present day. The Roman soldiers would not rend the Saviour's robe; but His own friends have torn the garment of His salvation into more than a hundred fragments and divided it among themselves. There are I know not how many denominations agreeing mainly in the essential truths of the gospel, but differing just enough to keep up a constant irritation. All along the narrow way may

¹ Acts iv. 32.² Gal. v. 15.³ Gal. ii. 11.⁴ Eph. iv. 3.⁵ Acts xv. 39.⁶ I Cor. i. 12.

be seen the rival mountains of Zion and Gerizim, crowned with their threatening towers, frowning defiantly on each other: and "The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans."¹

But when at last the children shall reach their Father's house in heaven, they will love one another more. Once within the mansions built of grace and beautified with glory, their party names and petty differences will be all forgotten. Their hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, and such like works of the flesh shall be left behind them, and all the members of the family shall be altogether lovely. In the pillar or door-post so elegant and even, so straight and smooth, and "polished after the similitude of a palace,"² you will hardly be able to recognize the rough and crooked cedar that you used to know; nor will there be any thing strange in taking sweet counsel with those who were not congenial on the earth.

Love's own country will be large enough for Abraham and Lot, and there will be no strife between them concerning the green pastures of Paradise. John will be just like Jesus at the marriage supper in the marriage mansion; and should he see some of the inhospitable Samaritans there, he will have no desire to call down fire "and consume them."³ Peter and Paul will be "both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless."⁴ Paul and Barnabas "shall see eye

¹ John iv. 9.

² Ps. cxliv. 12.

³ Luke ix. 54.

⁴ Luke i. 6.

to eye,"¹ and have no contention forever. The members of the church of Corinth shall be "perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."² "The envy also of Ephraim shall depart, and the adversaries of Judah shall be cut off: Ephraim shall not envy Judah, and Judah shall not vex Ephraim."³

No angry word, no unkind look, no evil thought, will ever be heard, or seen, or entertained in heaven. There the Elder Brother's prayer will be answered, "That they all may be one: as thou Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us."⁴ Thrice happy family! "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."⁵

Heaven is a spacious home. "In my Father's house are many mansions." If we should take a survey of the present generation, we would be surprised at the fewness of the saints. The way to heaven is narrow, and in it there is only here and there a traveller. But the way to heaven was always narrow, and in every generation the saints were few in comparison of those who loved not the Lord: "Narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it."⁶ Because the Church is spoken of "as the lily among thorns,"⁷ and as a "little flock"⁸ in the

¹ Isa. lii. 8.

² Isa. xi. 13.

³ Gal. iii. 28.

⁷ Cant. ii. 2.

⁵ I Cor. i. 10.

⁴ John xvii. 21.

⁶ Mat. vii. 14.

⁸ Luke xii. 32.

midst of ravening wolves, some people have come to think that the lost will be more in number than the saved; and that hell is a larger place than heaven.

And though it may seem such a vain and foolish thing for us to speculate about the probable number of the saved and lost, as if we were standing on the deck of a sinking ship, and counting those who escape safe to land, and those who perish, and then comparing them with each other,—yet after all we can not help saying that, in our opinion, the number of the saved will be much greater than the number of the lost. The Captain of our salvation in one place is spoken of as “bringing many sons unto glory;”¹ and in another place, as “reconciling the world unto Himself;”² and better yet, we read in another place, that “He is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world:”³ and there is a proper scripture sense in which it may be said that the world shall be saved.

In striving for the mastery, the Saviour will overcome Satan. With His bruised heel He shall bruise the serpent's head, and the trophies of His grace shall be multiplied like the drops of the morning dew. The “remnant according to the election of grace,”⁴ the scanty few, the travellers here and there along the narrow way, when gathered all together, at the home-gathering in heaven, will be a goodly company. The little flock shall become a large flock in heaven: it is a large flock already. The little lambs alone, whom

¹ Heb. ii. 10.

² II. Cor. v. 19.

³ I John ii. 2.

⁴ Rom. xi. 5.

the good Shepherd carried away in His bosom, are so numerous that no man could count them. And as more than half the human race die in infancy, we have a majority to begin with. And if to these we add all "the holy men of old," since righteous Abel bent alone before the throne; and then to these all those throughout the world who are now adorning the doctrine of God their Saviour; and then to these the saints of the coming millennium, the thousand years of reigning righteousness, it shall come to pass that the most of mankind shall be saved. And so there is a need-be for the many mansions in the heavenly home. "After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands."¹

They are quite mistaken in their contracted conceptions of heaven, and have no proper sympathy with its catholic spirit, who look upon it as the meeting place of a sect: a little upper room where a small party shall be gathered together in close communion. The New Jerusalem has been seen and measured; and, believe me, it is big enough for every body. And as we glance at the glorious home to which we are going, we can not help praying that there may be a full heaven and an empty hell. "He carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory

¹ Rev. vii. 9.

of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; and had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: on the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And he that talked with me had a golden reed to measure the city, and the gates thereof, and the wall thereof. And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal. And he measured the wall thereof, a hundred and forty and four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of the angel.”¹

You will notice that the same number of gates into the new city open toward every quarter of the globe. “On the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates.” And may we not entertain the hope that every quarter of the globe shall be equally represented among the redeemed who shall walk those golden streets? “I say unto you, That many shall come from the east, and west, and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”² “I will say to the north, Give up; and

¹ Rev. xxi. 10-17.

² Mat. viii. 11.

to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth."¹

The time was when but one of these mansions was occupied; righteous Abel was for many years the only saint in heaven. When, therefore, the new song was first sung in the new city, it was a solo; but that song which was started by a single voice soon became a chorus, and the volume of that chorus has been increasing ever since, and it will wax louder and louder, till time shall end. "I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunders, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth."² For this countless throng, we rejoice to know there is room enough in heaven.

"In my Father's house are many mansions." What a blessed truth this is! What if we do not know where heaven is! what if we can not tell the exact number of those who shall go there! what if there be so many things about it that we do not understand! there is this one thing about it, beautifully plain and heart-touching, the mansions are many. Oh how sweet it sounds! there is room enough for all the world in heaven. The vacant mansions are not so many as they were, because a goodly number have been taken; others are spoken for. And day and night without ceasing, a blood-washed, white-robed, and palm-bearing procession is pressing through the gates into that glorious home, "yet there is room."³ There is room enough for you, and room enough for

¹ Isa. xliii. 6.

² Rev. xix. 6.

³ Luke xiv. 22.

me, and room enough for all the world in heaven. And, better still, by the grace of God, some of us are on the way, and some of us are almost there—almost home. The aromatic atmosphere is evidence enough that we are among the mountains of myrrh and the hills of frankincense along the border of the better country: and in the night we can see, gleaming through the darkness, the light of the celestial city and of our Father's house. Yes, blessed be God, we are almost home. And such a home! a home so happy; a home so beautiful; a home so abiding; a home so peaceful; a home so spacious.

"O my sweet home, Jerusalem!
Thy joys when shall I see?"

There are, doubtless, some of you who have no home in heaven; no Father there, nor Brother. And I can not close without saying that you may have all these freely and forever. Some of these beautiful mansions, at which we have been looking, are to let; and, by the grace of God, I am one of those agents whose business it is to rent them to you, or any body else. Nay, I am one of those servants to whom the Landlord hath said, "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled."¹

Dearly beloved and longed-for, if you would like to have such a house, and secure such a home, I now, in my Master's name, offer you the lease: a lease not for a year, nor for a term of years, but for eternity;

¹ Luke xiv. 23.

a lease "without money and without price."¹ Come to Jesus just now, and just as you are; His cross is the key, and Himself is the door: "By me if any man enter in, he shall be saved."² Would that I could persuade you to take the first look heavenward to-day! Would that I could constrain you to take the first step homeward to-day! Then your heaven would be more than two heavens for me, and your home would be more than two homes for me: "For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ."³

When La Fayette made his last visit to this country, our fathers gave him a right royal reception. A gaily decorated fleet sailed down the bay to meet him; coming within hailing of his ship, all the bands of music began to play the favorite French air, "Where can one better be, than in the bosom of his family." The venerable man acknowledged the compliment with courtesy, but manifested no emotion. As he came ashore, the land and water were trembling to the thunder of artillery, old soldiers of the Revolution saluted him with tears, and all the people shouted—"Welcome, welcome, La Fayette!" but still the noble marquis remained unmoved. With waving banners, and under triumphal arches, he was conducted to Castle Garden, where many of the great men of the nation were gathered to do him honor; yet all this while he remained unmoved. But just as soon as he had taken his seat in a marquee which had been prepared for him, a curtain was lifted, revealing a

¹ Isa. lv. 1.² John x. 9.³ Phil. i. 8.

representation of La Grange where he was born and brought up; and when he saw the shadow of the old family mansion and his own sweet home, the great man's great heart was touched into tenderness, and he bowed his head, buried his face in his hands, and wept like a child.

To those of you who are away from home, what shall I more say? what can I more say? With pleasant thoughts about your Father's house, I have tried to touch your hearts, and make you homesick, and it may be that I have failed. But if only I could stretch out my hand and draw aside the blue curtain of the sky, and you could get one glimpse of heaven, the sight of your eyes would so affect your heart, that you could not help saying, "I will arise and go to my Father."¹ And straightway your Father would rise and run down to meet you here, and fall upon your neck, and kiss you, and take you up to your heavenly home.

"Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room."²

¹ Luke xv. 18.

² Luke xiv. 22.

LORD, thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God. O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil. Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children. And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us; and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

